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THE WHITE BIRCH-TREE

STALIN PRIZE NOVEL

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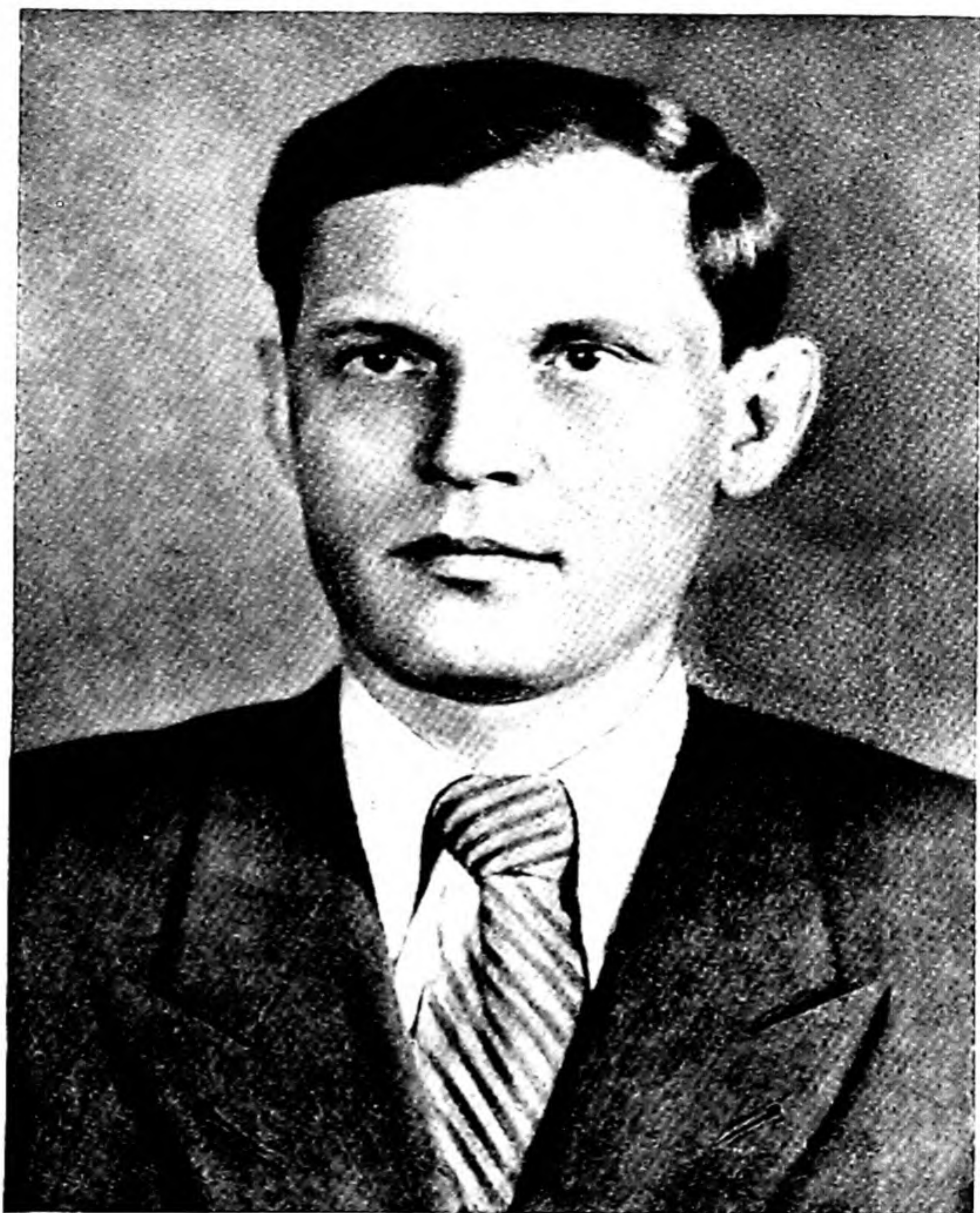
М. Бубеннов

МИХАИЛ БУБЕННОВ

БЕЛАЯ БЕРЕЗА

Роман в двух книгах

Книга первая

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва 1954

MIKHAIL BUBENNOV

THE WHITE BIRCH-TREE

A novel

BOOK ONE

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
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CONTENTS

Out in the field the birch-tree stood
Combing her curls in the field she stood. . . .

* * *

Wounded by an axe-blade, the silver birch is weeping
Down her silver birch bark, silver tears are creeping.
Don't you cry, my birch-tree, dearest, do not sorrow,
This will not be fatal; it will heal tomorrow.

A. K. TOLSTOY

PART ONE

* I *

The leaves came rustling down. Sadly, submissively, almost without pause the forests were shedding their scarlet foliage. The sorrowful rustle of falling leaves, drowning every other sound, held sway in the deep forest. From the roads and woodland clearings, where they lay thickly, gusts of wind lifted them in clouds high into the air, set them swirling and then carried them away towards the east; at such times a scarlet storm seemed to be raging over the dismal autumn land.

The rustle of the falling leaves filled Andrei's heart with anxiety and grief. He trailed along wearily in his faded tunic, with a rolled greatcoat and rifle slung over

his shoulder, frequently wiping his dusty face with his forage cap. At times his legs felt so shaky that he was surprised to find himself still marching. Autumn that year had burst upon his native district at the appointed time, yet somehow Andrei regarded its advent as particularly sudden and bold. He could not bear to see the cruel force of autumn triumphing everywhere—in the gleaming, gilded woods, in the bare, empty fields.

At noon, Andrei halted on the crest of a hill, and straightened up to his full height, forcing himself to look at the surrounding country. The roads were filled with columns of soldiers, lorries and carts rumbling along in a thick screen of dust. In the autumn sky German planes glistening in the sun were droning eastward; they swooped down on the roads, screaming, and the earth shuddered heavily, and coughed up ragged black plumes of smoke.

"What an autumn!" Andrei shouted wildly, wiping his face with his cap.

The commander of his section, Sergeant Matvei Yurgin, a tall, dark-skinned, glum-looking Siberian, glanced at him anxiously.

"What's up? What's come over you?"

"Don't you see what an autumn it is?"

"It's a noisy autumn. . . ."

"It's terrible," Andrei retorted.

"You're ill," Yurgin declared with conviction.

The division was withdrawing by way of remote paths and sometimes, where there were no paths at all, through the dense, marsh-ridden forests of the Rzhev region.

Just off the road, on the slope of a little rise, stood a lone birch sapling with tender, satiny white bark. The young birch-tree was shaking its branches with childish glee, as if bidding a rapturous greeting to the sun; and the wind, playing with the tree, was gaily counting the tinkling pure gold of its foliage. A faint luminescence,

as from some magic lamp, seemed to glow from the leaves. There was something challenging, even impudent, about its loneliness in that dreary autumn field.

The birch caught Andrei's eye, and he felt that nature herself had granted it the right to stand in that field through the ages. Abruptly he turned off the road. He walked up to the birch, and a sudden pain rose in his chest.

Andrei had loved birch-trees since childhood. He loved to watch them in the spring when they awakened and began to grope in the air with their naked branches; he loved to breathe in the fragrance of their dew-drenched leaves at dawn; he loved to watch their rustling dance round the edge of the glades, to watch them reach out their heavily-frosted arms toward the windows and rock red-breasted bullfinches on their boughs.

Matvei Yurgin called to Andrei from the road. Andrei neither turned nor answered; he was hurriedly unshouldering his greatcoat. Yurgin strode back to him and asked even more anxiously than before, "What's come over you, Andrei? What's the matter?"

Andrei looked at the Sergeant as he had never looked at him before.

"How much longer will this go on?" said Andrei, leaning forward. "How much longer?"

Yurgin had never seen him in such a state. Andrei was a quiet, easy-going soldier; a steady light always shone in his bright, crystal-clear eyes. What had happened to him? A dark, dry flush burned in his handsome, thoughtful face, there was mute anguish in his tear-filled eyes, and his parched lips were trembling.

"How much farther?" he whispered vehemently.

Now Yurgin understood. "Come, come," he said in a softer voice. "We've got commanders for that. They know. When they give the order we'll make a stand. What's the matter with you?"

Andrei had suddenly dropped to the ground beside the birch. He sat there motionless for a minute, with his hands over his eyes. Then he looked up at the west. The entire horizon was shrouded in a dark purplish haze illuminated from time to time by brilliant flashes; over the dismal autumn fields the storm of leaves raged unceasingly.

"Why did they come here?" Andrei asked with anguish in his voice. "Why?"

Yurgin made no reply, knowing that Andrei did not expect one. Andrei picked up the greatcoat. Then, without turning to look east, where a dark fir-wood stood, Andrei confided, "On the other side of that wood is Olkhovka."

"Your village?" Yurgin asked in surprise.

"Yes. . . ."

Andrei sat motionless by the birch a minute more, his hands over his eyes. . . .

* II *

It was a long way through the dense wood. An oppressive smell of damp hung in the still air. Along the muddy road moss-grown firs reared high into the sky. Under the firs, bowing feebly, grew stunted rusty alders that had never seen the sun. In the drowsy glades and openings lay stagnant marshes with rank reddish water.

Late in the afternoon the battalion emerged from the wood, and the men were confronted by a broad open slope rising to a large village. This was Olkhovka. All over the village grew tall, leafy birches; their satiny bark gave off a soft, radiant glow that suffused the entire hill-top. The men quickened their pace. As soon as they climbed the slope many of them dropped down to rest beside the wicker fences of the outlying cottages. A large group,

water-bottles in hand, gathered around a well at the edge of the village.

Andrei also headed for the well. His face was coated with dust, and reflections of the flashes streaking across the dark western sky seemed to flicker in his eyes. Matvei Yurgin filled Andrei's water-bottle for him out of turn. Andrei took a few noisy gulps, then lowered the bottle and looked at the village. The Olkhovka water seemed to revive him. Now that he was in Olkhovka the thoughts that had been tormenting him on the way lost their meaning and vanished of their own accord. He must content himself with the little that life granted; even this was not given to all.

Matvei Yurgin leaned against a fence, screwing the cap on his water-bottle. "You have good water here," he remarked appreciatively, with his habitual restraint.

"Yes, it's not everywhere you find water like that," Andrei answered. "That was a real drink—refreshed me and gave me a kick too."

"All right," Yurgin said dourly, "but don't get so worked up."

He hitched his water-bottle to his belt. "There's the Battalion Commander. Ask him to let you drop in," he advised Andrei. "Only mind you don't stay long."

Andrei sprang away from the fence. "Where is he?"

Several horsemen had ridden into the village. Ahead on a sweating bay, his grey trench coat flung open, rode Senior Lieutenant Loznevoi, the Battalion Commander. He had a long, lean face with a thin hooked nose; in the shadow cast by the long peak of his crimson-banded cap a pair of wary grey eyes gleamed like cold steel. His features wore a disgruntled expression that rarely changed and when he did smile it was a crooked smile, with the left side of his face only.

Andrei was a little afraid of the Battalion Commander. But now, oblivious of everything, he strode up to him with

unusual determination. Reining in his horse, Loznevoi had turned in his saddle and was pointing out something in the west to the other horseman; a Cossak whip with a carved crop hung from his wrist.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, Comrade!. . ." Andrei interrupted him desperately.

Loznevoi swung round in his saddle.

"What's that? What are you shouting about?"

"This is my village. My home is here, Comrade Battalion Commander!" he burst out in confusion. "May I drop in? I'll catch up!"

"Where is your house?" Loznevoi asked in a stern, suspicious tone.

"Right over on the other side."

Loznevoi put his hand to the peak of his cap and looked in the direction Andrei indicated. The sun shone full on one side of his face and on his beaky nose. He smiled his crooked smile and asked, "Will there be something to eat?"

"Why of course, Comrade Battalion Commander. All you want."

"Lead the way!" Loznevoi commanded suddenly. "Your luck's in. We'll spend the night here." Gathering the reins, he turned to the other riders. "Khmelko, billet the men. You, Kostya, come with me!"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!" And the orderly prodded his horse.

The village was in commotion. Many of the villagers were boarding up their windows. Women were dashing about loading sacks and bright-coloured bundles into carts and seating howling children on them. Shrill voices rang out over the streets.

"Get your things loaded. Look, here's some more of the army."

"Oh dear, if we could only set out before dark."

"Buck up there, women, what are you stopping for?"

A flush spread under the heavy tan of Andrei's cheeks. All of a sudden he felt so hot that he pulled off his cap and wiped his temples with it. "Everybody's leaving," he murmured to himself.

While retreating with his unit Andrei had already passed through many villages, large and small—and everywhere he had seen the same thing: in agitated, grief-stricken crowds the people were abandoning birthplace and home, abandoning all that was dear to their hearts, and, cursing the Germans, were moving east. Wherever he had passed, road or no road, he had seen uprooted families seeking salvation in flight. But only now, when he saw what was happening in his native Olkhovka, did Andrei realize the full import of the calamity; it was as if from here, from this lofty Olkhovka hill, he had seen for a second the whole broad expanse of his homeland. "What about my folk? Perhaps they will be going too?" Andrei thought suddenly. "Shall I find them at home?" This thought spurred him on. He walked as fast as he could, swinging his cap in his hand; as he walked along he took in with naive excitement the familiar sights of his village.

Battalion Commander Loznevoi rode his horse at a walk slightly behind Andrei, keeping his eyes on him for a long time. During this week of retreat there had already been several cases of soldiers asking "to drop in home." He had never before seen men speak of their homes with such agitation and longing. It depressed him every time.

"Look how he runs," he remarked, turning to his orderly.

"Like the wind," the orderly replied cheerfully.

"Even forgotten about the war, hasn't he?"

The orderly prodded his horse and brought it level with his commander's. Kostya was a fair-haired lad, very

young, with shoulders that had not yet broadened out and soft lips that still retained a carefree boyish warmth. Grinning artlessly from ear to ear, he replied in the same cheerful voice, "The war? He's got no time for that now."

"See the panic in the village?"

"How can I help seeing it! The people are on the run!"

"The people and the army," Loznevoi added glumly.

The Lopukhov house stood at the edge of the village, overlooking the steep eastern slope of the hill. From here the Lopukhovs were the first in Olkhovka to see the sun, rested after the night, rise over the dense Rzhev forests. Most of the Lopukhov farmstead had been built in recent years. Time and the elements had only slightly weathered the big peasant cottage with its wooden roof. Under the eaves white pigeons calmly sat preening themselves and gazing up into the sky.

While he was still some distance away Andrei saw that the house had not been abandoned like others in the village, and, pausing on a hillock, he turned to Loznevoi and called out breathlessly, "They're home! We're in time"!

He plunged forward and threw open the gate.

"Maryika!"

From the depths of the yard came a woman's ecstatic cry. Loznevoi reined in his horse by the fence and looked into the yard. On the ramp in front of the barn stood a slim-waisted black-eyed young woman in a cherry-coloured cotton dress. She stood for an instant in confusion, convulsively pressing her hands to her high breast, then gave another cry, dashed headlong from the barn and, rather than embracing, fell limply on the broad shoulders of Andrei, who had stepped forward to meet her. Loznevoi froze in his saddle. "His wife! I say, what a beauty! And how she loves him!" It was several seconds before he could tear his admiring gaze from her.

A plump elderly woman in a hand-knitted grey wool jacket came out on the porch. She walked down in cautious haste, one step at a time.

"Bless me!" she exclaimed. "Andrei, my son!"

From behind the shed leaped a blond youngster whose broad frame instantly stamped him a Lopukhov. He threw a glance at Andrei, who was still embracing his wife, and shouted, "Bro-ther!" at the top of his voice.

They all gathered round Andrei, whom the reunion had instantly transformed; his tanned, weather-beaten face was wreathed in smiles, and his gentle, crystal-clear eyes shone like spring sunshine. They hugged him with exclamations and tears, oblivious of the strangers at the gate. Even the vicious-looking black watch-dog forgot his duty and yelped and frisked about the family group.

"Now, now, that's enough," Andrei said at last. "What are you crying about?"

Loznevoi dismounted. He handed Kostya his reins and whip, took off his cap, wiped his lean face with a handkerchief and quickly smoothed down his ruffled, mousy hair. Casting another glance at Maryika, he whispered to Kostya, "He didn't run for nothing!"

Kostya nodded. "Terrific," he replied admiringly.

The first to recover was the dog, Chorny, who, sensing strangers, looked toward the gate and gave a short bark. Realizing that his Battalion Commander was looking on, Andrei felt awkward and began to free himself gently from the embraces of his family.

"All right, that's enough. Where's Father?"

Maryika knitted her brows. "Oh, Father! . . ."

"What's the matter? Where is he?"

"Over there, in the vegetable garden. . . ."

"What's wrong?" Andrei asked anxiously.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," his mother put in quickly. She touched her younger son on the shoulder. "Vasya, dear, run over and tell him. Has he gone deaf there or what?"

Andrei gathered that there had been some sort of quarrel in the house. He stopped his brother.

"Wait, Vasya, I'll go myself," he said. Then he turned to the gate. "Comrade Battalion Commander, what are you standing there for? Come in. Mother, Maryika, this is our Battalion Commander! You look after him and I'll go to the vegetable garden. . . ."

At close sight everything about Maryika suddenly seemed familiar to Loznevoi: the tight black braids fixed in a crown on her proud head; the soft, pretty face bright with animation; the faint, ruddy glow under the tan of her cheeks; the lips, as full as a child's and ready at any moment to break into a smile, and the dark eyes shining with happiness. Somewhere, at some time, he had seen her. But where? When? Or had he only dreamed of someone like her? Loznevoi was even somewhat confused. Lowering his eyes, he put his fingers to his cap.

"Peace to this house."

Andrei's mother, Alevtina Lopukhova, bowed. "You are welcome."

But Maryika, taking in the guest with a quick glance, answered, not knowing why herself, mockingly and impertinently, "What peace? The war is knocking at our gates! We had peace, but it's gone. . . . You ought to fight better!"

"Really, Maryika!" her mother fluttered.

"She's got a sharp little tongue!" Loznevoi remarked in embarrassment.

"Yes, indeed!"

He watched her slowly climb the steps without turning, the muscles of her long brown legs flexing smoothly. She was wearing light house shoes. In front of the door she shrugged her right shoulder and tossed her proud head, as though casting off an annoying thought.

"Yes, she is sharp!. . ." Loznevoi said when the girl disappeared in the passage without turning as he had

wanted her to. But now there was a puzzled note in his voice.

... Beyond the shed, in a corner of the vegetable garden, under a spreading mountain ash whose leaves had turned an ominous reddish colour, was a pit, and next to it a heap of yellow earth. Damp, clayey clods were flying out of the pit. Andrei realized at once that his father was in a bad mood. "What on earth have they been quarrelling about?" he wondered as he strode over the rows of withered cucumber plants. At the sound of approaching footsteps Erofei Lopukhov, Andrei's father, stopped digging, looked up from the bottom of the hole and, realizing that one of the family was approaching, asked grumpily, "Who's that out there? What's going on in the yard?"

"It's me," said Andrei, coming up to the hole.

"Andrei? It can't be!"

Like the other members of the household, Erofei was both surprised and overjoyed by his son's unexpected arrival. But he was so taken up with some thought of his own that he neither released his spade, nor climbed out of the hole. "I'll finish digging," he said to himself, "and then I'll climb out." A robust, broad-shouldered man in a long, loose, unbelted blue blouse dark with perspiration at the back, he stood there in the pit, his broad, old-fashioned blond beard uplifted, looking up with quick, frowning grey eyes. After inspecting his son in the unfamiliar army uniform and evidently reaching some secret conclusion about him, he heaved a brief, sad sigh.

"Well, so you've had enough fighting?"

Andrei squatted at the edge of the pit. "We're withdrawing for the time being."

"And then?"

Andrei held a lump of cool earth in his palm for a moment and then slowly crushed it. Deliberately, in

a rather flat voice, he said, "Then I suppose we'll come back."

"Come back? How soon, though?"

Andrei made no reply. He gazed reflectively for a while at the mountain ash; the sunlight was playing on its reddish leaves and clusters of berries.

"What's the pit for?"

The answer came unwillingly. "For our belongings."

"And what about yourselves?"

"Well?"

"When are you leaving?"

This time it was Erofei who did not answer; and it seemed to Andrei that he was restraining his irritation with difficulty as he leaned on his spade and looked up out of the pit. He was breathing heavily through his nostrils.

"Where to?" he said suddenly with his habitual bluster, although he had not wanted to use that tone in talking to his son at such a time. "Come on, you tell me. Where to? To the back of beyond? And leave the house?"

Shining beads of perspiration broke out on Andrei's forehead. Wiping his face with his cap, he glanced round, as if looking for someone to take over this conversation with his father. Carts began to rattle down the hillside past the vegetable garden. A string of women, talking in shrill voices, filed past the fence.

"All the same," Andrei said quietly, "you ought to go. Look, all the collective-farm people are leaving."

"You're all so clever when it comes to telling other people!" Erofei lost control of himself and gave full vent to his irritation. "Your better half is yelling her head off all the time too! Where can we go? She doesn't think about that. To roam the roads? I know what that means! The world's big but it's not very cosy. Besides, if we leave behind everything we've got, it'll be looted.

People are always ready to grab anything that's left lying about. And what you do take, you'll lose on the road. No, we can't leave our home. With God's help, nothing will happen to us. They aren't fighting civilians. You army men go ahead with your fighting, but we'll have no part in it. That's the way it's always been."

"All the same, you'd better leave," Andrei repeated stubbornly.

With a quick angry glance at his son Erofei raised his spade in one hand and jabbed it viciously into the earth.

"That's all there is to it! I've said my say!"

* III *

All his youth Erofei Lopukhov had worked as a hired hand for wealthy farmers of the locality, and longest of all for Polikarp Dryagin, a hard, grasping man who was successful in everything he undertook. By the modest standards of the Rzhev region, Polikarp Dryagin had a large farm; he had five horses, a stable full of small live-stock, and a water-mill. Although Dryagin was a surly, close-fisted master who paid less than anyone else, Erofei came to him every spring.

"What draws you to that house?" the villagers used to ask him. "Dryagin would suck blood out of a stone!"

"Aye, that's so!" Erofei would agree cheerfully.

"Then why do you work for him?"

"Can't help it!"

Being Dryagin's hired man meant a hard life, but still it was to him that Erofei went, and he went with a purpose: he was secretly learning from him how to "make good." It was Dryagin, with his high and unhampered way of living, who fired the dreams of wealth in the callow mind of the penniless farm lad. Erofei was a strong, handsome, capable young fellow, the envy of the

entire village. He had early become aware of this, and was proud of himself. Looking at the withered, wolfishly lean Dryagin, Erofei would think sneeringly, "Am I any worse than him? Why should I have to live as I do? No, I'm not that sort! I won't live that way—and that's that!" His dreams of wealth gave him no rest. All the time he worked for Dryagin he studied the way Dryagin quickly expanded his farm like a man skilfully building up a camp-fire and fanning it into a blaze. He envied Dryagin with all his heart and sincerely admired every success he achieved.

"Look at Dryagin!" he used to say to the villagers, almost with pride. "That was fast work, that was! He grabbed another strip of land this year! See that, eh? Getting richer all the time, our Dryagin is, getting richer!"

When he drew his pay in the late autumn he would tell hi- neighbours disappointedly, but with envious admiration:

"What a darn skinflint that Dryagin is! In the spring we fixed our terms, but when pay-day came along he cheated me. I argued all I could, but he still cheated me! And there's nothing you can say about it! He twisted me round his little finger! And the neat way he did it—it's a miracle! Oh, he knows how to get along, our Dryagin does! He does, indeed!"

During his long years as a hired man Erofei managed somehow to acquire a horse and a cow and set up a little place of his own. Then he got married and became his own master—with dizzying dreams of wealth.

The hard Dryagin school did not yield results, however. Erofei worked day and night, and resorted to every possible dodge to expand the farm. But nothing came of it. Some spiteful will seemed to be turning everything against him: a wolf killed his colt, then a hailstorm ruined the wheat crop, then his cow strayed and was drowned in a marsh, then a fire razed the house. To top it all, his

wife gave birth to three daughters in a row. And what good were daughters to a peasant? He did not receive an extra share of land for them. They had to be brought up, and a dowry put away for them besides. Disappointed in his fierce yearning for a prosperous life, Erofei sometimes turned to drink. "Damn this damned life!" he would roar as he staggered about the house. "Just can't get ahead! Not a ray of hope. How long will this go on?"

Erofei remained poor right up to the revolution. In the first year of Soviet power he was given more land, a horse, and building timber. And then his dreams of wealth revived with even greater intensity.

"What a government!" he bellowed for all Olkhovka to hear. "It's ours! Ours! With a government like this, men, we'll get along fine!"

Soon after, Andrei was born. Erofei's spirits soared. Andrei grew up a quiet, good-natured boy, but he was strong and industrious. While still a boy, he began to do all the jobs about the farm, and very efficiently at that. Erofei's heart beat faster with joy; the farm was improving rapidly, and there were hopes that his cherished dream might soon come true.

But then the organization of collective farms began. To the surprise of many, Erofei who had always been a poor peasant and had only recently got on his feet, flatly refused to join the collective farm. He stubbornly held out on his beloved little farmstead, as on an island amid the spring flood. One year passed, then another, but he continued to hold back. At last he suddenly disappeared from the village—went off to seek his fortune elsewhere.

For about three years he roamed along the upper reaches of the Volga. It was rumoured that he was a drayman in Rzhev, then that he was a tanbark purchasing agent, then a timber rafter. . . . The Olkhovka folk had already decided that the self-willed Erofei had

broken completely with his home and the land. Then one day he returned, as suddenly as he had left, sullen, and aged by his wanderings; only his trim blond beard told people who he was.

By then the Lopukhovs had been in the collective farm a long time, but Erofei did not reproach his family for disregarding his orders. During his wanderings Andrei had grown into a big, strong, handsome fellow—the type the Lopukhovs were noted for. He was respected in the collective farm for his straightforwardness, his good nature and his industry. No matter what the job was, he put his heart into it. All the villagers had become accustomed to thinking of him as the head of the household. Erofei expected his now grown-up son to balk at stern paternal rule. But he turned out to be as retiring, good-natured and gentle as before; he had inherited much of his mother's character.

"Well, boss, how are things going?" Erofei asked, sizing up his son. Andrei stood shyly before his father on the threshold, his tufty blond head lowered. "How are you managing the place? How's your work going? Well, why don't you say something?"

"Not bad," Andrei mumbled.

But Alevtina, with proud glances at her son, produced his little grey work-day record book from the cupboard and placed it before her husband.

"Just look at this! This is his work!" Then she added with a sob, "Everybody here seems to be doing nicely!"

When Erofei had taken a good look round Olkhovka he saw that quite a different life had indeed begun there. Many of the villagers were building new houses. All had plenty of stock of their own.

Erofei did not conceal his chagrin from his family. "Damn it, there's luck for you!" he swore. "Look at that! Who the devil could have told that the collective farm would get along like that?"

There was nothing for it but to give in. Erofei joined the collective farm and to everybody's surprise began to work industriously: he had to get into favour with the other members, win their confidence and, before old age broke him, make up for the years of aimless wandering. And soon the Lopukhovs became prosperous; they caught up with everybody who had joined the collective farm earlier.

Then the war broke out. The German hordes advanced into the interior of the country. Oppressive uncertainty beset Erofei. He became silent and gloomy, especially after Andrei was called up. It was difficult to gather what he thought about the war. Sometimes after listening to the news from the battle fronts he would make a sour face and wave his hand.

"Blockheads! Have they gone crazy?"

But the next day, after listening to the latest news, he would contract his bushy eyebrows and sigh.

"Aye, advancing all the time.... It's past my understanding! What will happen?"

At the beginning of October the Germans breached the Central Front over a broad sector and quickly moved towards Moscow. By that time all the collective-farm livestock in Olkhovka had been driven off to the east. The collective farmers, however, were in no hurry to leave home; they kept hoping the enemy would soon be checked. But suddenly all roads were flooded with the retreating units of the Red Army. Then the Olkhovka folk took to flight from their native village.

Erofei also decided to leave, but when he started packing, his heart contracted with pain. How could he take along all his possessions in one cart? At every turn he came upon something that had to be left behind: various carpenter's tools, brand-new pickling tubs, the beehives, the geese.... Would he ever be able to acquire all that again? No, Erofei knew how hard it was to come

by such possessions. And he arrived at a sudden and firm decision to remain in the village.

"No, I can't do it!" he said to the family, clutching at his heart.

All the family tried their best to persuade him to go, but he remained adamant. After a stormy quarrel with them all, and with Maryika especially, he stamped out to the vegetable garden to dig a pit in which to hide his belongings.

* IV *

Andrei had married in the spring, shortly before the war. To many his marriage with Maryika had come as a surprise. And at first Andrei himself could not believe in his luck.

All the lads of Andrei's age were daring, venturesome and boisterous young fellows; with them about, it was always gay and noisy in the village. This made the quiet and bashful Andrei stand out all the more in their midst.

The Olkhovka girls respected Andrei, as did everyone else in the village. But naturally, they liked to make fun of the quiet fellows, Andrei included. Their ringleader in mischief was usually Maryika Logova, widow Anfissa Markovna's daughter. Maryika, a dark, vivacious beauty with the voice of a lark, was the most attractive girl in Olkhovka. It seemed as though by common agreement her girl-friends had given her alone most of their beauty and vivacity and, thus lavishly endowed, she had grown up the pride and joy of the entire village.

One hot summer day Andrei was building a shed for the watchman at the collective farm vegetable gardens. Towards evening the girls of the gardening team came to visit him after watering the vegetables. The first to approach the shed, where Andrei was at work with his axe, was Maryika. A full pail of water swayed at either end of the yoke she carried.

"Andrei!" she called out slyly.

Andrei poked his head out of the shed.

"Like a drink?"

"I think I would. Stuffy, isn't it?"

While Andrei, his forelock dangling, drank from one of the pails, Maryika kept her mischievous gaze fixed on his perspiring back. The moment he straightened up she splashed water on him from the other pail.

"Up to your tricks again!" was all Andrei had time to say.

At a sign from Maryika the girls rushed up in a squealing crowd and, dancing round him, began to drench him with water. Andrei did not move. His high forehead became plastered with wet hair. His soaked shirt clung tightly to his straight shoulders and broad chest. Those few seconds showed how much calm and affectionate strength he possessed. He did not get angry with the girls. He only shielded himself with his arms while they splashed water on him.

"Steady on, that's enough!" he pleaded in embarrassment. "That's enough, girls!"

"Pour!" commanded Maryika.

"Now then, you heard what I said!"

That was the beginning. Every day new tricks were played on him.

Erofei had long since decided to marry his son off. All the young men of Andrei's age had celebrated their weddings. And it was to Andrei's advantage as well to set up a family. He had not served in the army: a bad chill he had caught while rafting timber, had excused him at the time of the call-up, and he had stayed behind at the collective farm. But for some reason Andrei was in no hurry about marrying. This irritated his father. Life on the farm was going well and Erofei reasoned thriftily that an extra pair of hands in the house would mean extra wealth.

But the summer passed and winter—the wedding season—came, and still his son did not broach the topic. When, at the end of the winter, Andrei turned twenty-three, Erofei lost his patience.

"Well, Andrei, enough stalling!" he said firmly one morning soon after his name-day. "Do you hear?"

"What's the matter, Dad?"

Erofei flared up. "Don't stand there asking questions! Get married! And that's all there is to it!"

Andrei was filling cartridges to go grouse shooting. After a long pause he answered glumly, "I'll wait a bit."

"What for?" Erofei shouted. "What the devil for? Your mother's run off her feet all on her own! All over the house there's jobs to be done!"

"I'll wait a while."

"Lord, what a plague you are!"

Despite all Erofei's arguments his son did not consent to get married. At last he realized that he was wasting his time and decided to act in the old-fashioned way. Grandpa Silanty happened to be walking past the house and Erofei invited him in.

It's something very important, Grandpa!" he said worriedly. A match has to be arranged urgently. Can you do it, Grandpa? Haven't forgotten how?"

Old Silanty checked the trembling of his head for a minute and fixed his faded eyes on Erofei.

"A match? Arrange a match? Why, Erofei, we'll be the laughing-stock of the whole collective farm!"

"A laughing-stock, Grandpa? This is no laughing matter. What's wrong about going and having a talk with people? You can do that, can't you?"

Old Silanty shook with laughter. "Arrange a match! Why doesn't he do it himself?"

"But Grandpa!" Erofei frowned crossly. "How can he do it himself? Never on your life!"

"That's true," Grandpa agreed. "Your boy's a quiet fellow for these times. The kind that never make a fuss for nothing. Reminds me of the saying, 'A strong man never starts a fight.' He's a fine boy!"

But Erofei only waved this disappointing conclusion aside and started again on his son.

"Well, speak up," he said to Andrei. "Who's he to go to?"

"Don't make people laugh," Andrei replied, rattling his cartridges noisily.

"Laughter isn't smoke; it won't sting your eyes! Speak up—well?"

"I won't say anything. . . ."

"Don't you be stubborn, Andrei!" threatened Grandpa Silanty, who had suddenly decided to try his hand at his forgotten vocation once again. "Or else I'll arrange a match with Fenya, the half-wit! Then you'll be sorry!"

Andrei himself had long been contemplating marriage. But only one girl appealed to him: Maryika Logova. Since that incident in the vegetable garden her face had been constantly in his mind, and his secret love for her caused him much suffering. As yet, however, he was afraid even to think about marrying Maryika.

"Look here!" Andrei exclaimed when Grandpa Silanty suddenly decided to support his father. "First one of you acts silly and now it's both of you. I've had enough!" Then he added unexpectedly, "I'll arrange the marriage myself."

"Yourself?" his father asked. "Who with?"

"I'll find somebody better than half-wit Fenya."

"Who, for instance?"

"Maryika Logova."

Erofei stared distrustfully at his son for a few seconds. "What on earth—have you gone crazy?" he asked irritably.

"Why?"

"You're a fool! A fool pure and simple!" Erofei stormed. "The best girl in the collective farm. She has brains and looks and everything! And comes from a good family, besides. Why, she's a first-rate girl."

"That's the kind I need."

"But will she ever marry you? Have you thought about that? Huh! Some idea! Look at him! As I live and breathe, he's gone mad! Hasn't she made enough fun of you yet? Or do you want some more?"

"No, she won't marry him," Grandpa Silanty confirmed.

Andrei was always tractable, but this time he stated firmly that he would marry Maryika Logova and nobody else. He promised to speak to her as soon as possible. Still in a temper, Erofei agreed to postpone his own plan.

That evening Andrei saw Maryika on the village green. "Well, come what may," he thought, all afire. "Today I'll speak!" But Maryika, noticing that he had taken a seat to the side, gave him a flashing glance with her black eyes and started talking to her girl-friends. Andrei realized that she was plotting some new mischief, grew confused and promptly rejected his bold idea.

The accordionist bent his tousled head over his instrument and struck a loud chord for the singing. Maryika sprang forward and took up a pose with arms akimbo. While the accordionist fingered the white keys she cast a slow, artful look at the other girls. Then, tossing her plaits, she began to sing:

Ah, my heart, my heart unbridled,
Ah, beat softer, softer, heart!
For my laddie love is coming
And we never more shall part.

Sofia Veselova came up and stood on the other side of the accordionist. Clasping one hand to her breast, she

glanced at Maryika and with mock anxiety chanted in a throaty voice:

The wind is gone, and yet the birch-tree
Sings her song the whole day through.
Ah, my pretty, save thy trouble
He has not a thought for thee.

Andrei saw that the girls were going to make fun of him, and at the first opportunity he slipped away from the gathering.

"Well?" his father asked at the threshold.

"She said she'd think it over," Andrei replied gloomily.

Andrei hoped that his father, busy preparing the collective farm's harness for the spring, would soon forget about the marriage. But Erofei had firmly resolved to see the matter through to the end. Almost every morning he asked him how the courtship was coming along. At the end of a week Andrei had run out of excuses.

"She turned me down!" he declared. "Flat."

"What do you mean, turned you down?" his father stormed. That week he had often thought about Maryika and, little by little, grown accustomed to the idea that she should and would come into the house as his daughter-in-law.

"Just that. She turned me down. . . ."

"You're hopeless!"

When Erofei ran into Maryika in the farm-yard late the same afternoon he could not check himself. "So we're not good enough for you?" he cried heatedly. "Then who do you need? One of the district chiefs, eh? With a brief-case? No, my girl, mind you don't make a mistake! We're not just ordinary people, either, let me tell you! They've written about him in the newspaper. You needn't turn your nose up at us!"

Maryika was staggered.

"Erofei Kuzmich!" she exclaimed. "What's the matter with you? What are you talking about?"

"As if you don't know! After a whole week of talking! But I'll just tell you straight to your face: if you take a fellow with a brief-case you'll be sorry for the rest of your days! That's how it'll turn out, mark my words! For all your conceit!"

Immediately after her talk with Erofei, Maryika stepped into the club-house as though by chance. Andrei was repairing the stage. When he saw her he almost dropped his plane; he suddenly felt certain that one of the most important events in his life was now about to take place.

A few minutes later they were sitting on a stack of fresh-sawn planks that smelled of resin.

"Well, if you're willing, I'll be faithful to you to the grave," Andrei was saying, holding Maryika's hand. He shook his head, as though his happiness were more than he could bear, and Maryika was surprised to see tears glisten in his eyes. "My whole life will be with you alone. . . ."

The marriage took place soon after.

* V *

Maryika bustled about the house gaily, without concealing her happiness. The joy of seeing Andrei again had temporarily allayed all her fears. She was always like that: when she rejoiced she did it so wholeheartedly that everybody envied her, and when she grieved, everybody was afraid for her. The moment she had seen Andrei she had felt how wonderful it was to be by his side. She had realized more clearly than before how she had missed him, and how her heart had been bleak and empty all the summer without him, like an abandoned bird's nest.

As the guest of honour, Loznevoi was served in the best room. The others ate their supper in the kitchen. Maryika had to get up several times to serve the Battalion Commander. This irritated her. She did not want to be away from Andrei one second, not a single second! With him she was so happy that she did not think about anything—not even about the fact that the next morning her happiness would come to an end.

After supper Maryika called Andrei to one side. "Why did you bring him along?" she asked, nodding towards the door of the best room.

"The Battalion Commander? Why, what's wrong?"

"I don't like him."

"He's a good commander."

"A good commander! He looks at me like a cat at cream," Maryika said angrily. "Oh, those men! I'd scratch all their eyes out!" And to stress her distaste for the topic she abruptly changed it. "Shall I heat the bath for you?"

Andrei's face brightened. "Yes, that would be fine!"

"I'll do it straightaway."

Maryika started for the passageway but she stopped at the door and beckoned Andrei to her. "Won't you come and help?" she whispered, lifting her hand to his chest. "Do come!"

The steam bath stood beyond the vegetable patch, in a gully overgrown with hazel bushes, buckthorn and young birches. In this sheltered place the leaves, hiding from the autumn, were still green.

Dusk was falling. Black columns of smoke spiralled in the dark-purple west. The distant woods, like ancient fortresses with thousands of unlighted towers and cupolas giving off a dull golden glint, were fading into the twilight. But Olkhovka, on the hill, was still bright; everything—the birches, the bushes on the slopes, the housetops, the window-panes—was bathed in the purple after-

glow. And in the light sky a big brass moon hung idly; the brassiness of it made you want to take a stick and tap it to see how it rang.

Maryika kept Andrei by her side all the while she prepared the bath. Here, too, she did everything with more bustle than usual, with a sort of nervous energy. And she talked rapidly, too, now asking Andrei about army life, now telling him how she had missed him, now passing on the village news. When the wood under the stone slab began to crackle, she nestled up against Andrei. "It's like that in my heart too," she said. "A right good fire, with a crackle.... Are you listening to me? I suppose some people never get as much happiness in all their lives as I feel now. How do you feel, darling?"

"How do I feel—" Andrei paused. "First it's bright and then it's like here in the bath-house—sort of hazy."

"Hazy? Aren't you glad?"

Andrei saw how happy she was and did not want to remind her that his untimely arrival was not all joy.

"Because of Father?"

"Yes."

"Oh, botheration! Don't think about him, Andrei darling. I don't want you to think about that now...."

Andrei sighed. "Can't help it. What will happen to you all if you stay here? He's lived his life already—but you? It's awful to think about it. By the way, has your mother left?"

"Not yet. She's leaving tonight."

"Well, you go with her!"

Again Maryika pressed up to Andrei. "No, darling," she said softly. "That wouldn't be right. Now I've come to live with your family, I must stay with them. That's the way it has to be. If they stay I'll have to stay too. No, no, that's impossible!"

She stirred the blazing logs with a poker.

"Well, they're burning fine. Let's go for the water."

"Mind you're not sorry afterwards!"

"Don't worry, I won't be. Let's go."

At the spring she gathered up her skirt and sat down.

"Do you know why I love you?" she said, taking Andrei's hand.

Andrei smiled. "Who can tell?"

"You're just like this spring," Maryika said, pressing his hand firmly to her breast. "All of you! All of you! Well, what are you smiling about? Your eyes are like it: they're quiet and seem dark, but they're light inside, and you can see everything in them.... What are you laughing for? And no matter how much water you take from the spring it's always there. It's eternal. And I think you're like that too."

Andrei stroked her hair.

"Not all springs are eternal, Maryika. A spring may flow and flow, and then all of a sudden it's gone! Just vanished!"

"That's not true!" Maryika protested spiritedly. "If it disappears in one place it'll gush out in another. It'll be in a different place, but still it'll live on. Don't argue, they're eternal. And you're the same.... Let's carry the water."

Andrei reached for the pails. "Let me take them."

"No, Andrei, together. On this stick."

When she had filled the tank Maryika looked round, rubbing her smoke-stung eyes. "Now I'll have to sweep the floor. Look at all the litter. I'll go and pick twigs for a broom. No, no," she caught herself instantly. "Let's go together!"

They went into the birch grove. Andrei chose his twigs unhurriedly, but Maryika snatched at random, stripping the shrivelled leaves in her haste.

"Don't rush," Andrei said with a grin. "Rushbody."

Maryika straightened up and stood in front of him, a bunch of twigs in her lowered hand. She glanced at

Andrei and then lifted up her face. In the late afternoon glow her eyes were unusually bright, and her lips were slightly parted, as if she were panting.

"Andrei!" she called softly, as though something had frightened her. "My darling!" she called a little louder, and suddenly dropping the twigs she flung herself on his chest and cleaved to him. . . .

"But people will see us," Andrei said, his blood racing.

Afterwards they sat on the other side of the gully. In a strange, distant voice, Maryika said, "I'll wither away without you, Andrei." She groped on the ground. "Like this twig. We broke it off, and its whole life is finished. Soon it'll start to wither."

Andrei opened his tobacco pouch in silence. Then he pressed Maryika close to him.

"Don't be sad, my little swallow. You said I was eternal. You did, didn't you? Well, I'll come back."

"But when?"

"Who knows?"

"Listen," she said, very seriously. "You must come soon. . . . Do you hear?"

That was the end of Maryika's happiness.

They slept in the best room. Maryika was ready to lie awake talking the whole night long. But after the difficult march and the hot bath Andrei quickly fell asleep and began to snore heavily. It was the first time Maryika had ever heard him snore. She tried to turn him over on his side but could not: he was as heavy as the big stone near the porch. And then Maryika realized that Andrei had already changed in the past summer. And what if he had to fight a very long time? He would become an entirely different person. Tomorrow he would leave, and never, never again would she see him as he had been and was now, the Andrei she had fallen in love with and still loved. And what if he didn't come back at all? A shiver

passed down her spine. "My darling!" she almost screamed aloud. "My life's blood! I can't live without you! Do you hear? I can't live!" she raised her hand to his close-cropped head. She had always liked to play with his soft wavy hair. Now, when she felt the prickly stubble on Andrei's head she reflected once again that the war had already taken away from him something she loved, and that the next day it would carry him away from the house forever and engulf him in its bottomless pit.

A wave of horror swept over Maryika. She felt she would not be able to stop herself crying out so loudly that the whole house would hear. Cautiously she climbed out of bed and, on tiptoe, so as not to waken the guests or the family, went out on the porch.

The entire western edge of the sky was lit with a shimmering ruddy glow from fires hidden by the forest. The acrid smell of smoke was distinct in the moving air. But the eastern half of the sky was safe in the keeping of the dark October night. From the nearby thickets rose a dank chill; the autumn rains were coming.

Maryika felt a birch leaf under her bare foot, and it occurred to her that now Andrei and that leaf were alike: the wind would swirl them up and carry them no one knew where.

* VI *

Dawn brought a world submerged in fog. Dirty gray waves of it swirled gently and noiselessly all round Olkhovka hill. Here and there above the boundless sea of fog the tops of mounds were faintly outlined in the pinkish light of dawn; on them, like abandoned lighthouses, stood jagged black firs. Only the high hill-top was light.

The first to rise in the Lopukhov household was Alevtina. She was followed by Maryika, pale after an almost sleepless night. They busied themselves about the stove, trying to do everything quietly. They got along well to-

gether, and their common concern for Andrei added warmth to their friendship. Accustomed though she was to her husband's iron rule, Alevtina found it taxing, and, by nature a gentle and kind-hearted woman, she took respite from it in her friendship with her only daughter-in-law. Now, as they prepared food for Andrei to take with him, the two women carried on a whispered conversation by the stove.

Alevtina finished kneading the dough for her pies and then, hearing her husband snoring, brushed the tears from her plump perspiring cheeks and asked openly, "Did he say if they're going far?"

"How can he know, Mother?" A bitter smile flitted across Maryika's dry lips. "Well, surely no farther than Moscow. I don't think a war was ever fought past Moscow."

"And then? They'll come back?"

"How can it be otherwise, Mother?"

"Oh dear, oh dear! Andrei will ruin his feet!"

"I have packed an extra pair of foot cloths for him."

"What about socks? Make sure you put socks in, too," Alevtina ordered. "Wait, daughter. He didn't say why they're retreating, did he now? Those Germans, they aren't stronger, or, how should I put it, quicker, than our soldiers, are they?"

"I don't know, Mother. I've never seen them."

"No!" Alevtina exclaimed with sudden firmness; she even squared her shoulders. "May God strike me down, but I won't believe that anybody can get the better of the Russians! They're just waiting to find a proper place.... Heavens, daughter, what about a scarf? Did you put one in? Winter will be here soon."

"Oh, Mother, it'll be too heavy for him," Maryika protested. "If there's any fighting he'll have to do a lot of running!"

"But why should he run? He can put his things down and fight!"

Out in the yard Chorny began to bark furiously. Some army men had come to see Loznevoi. They asked the two women to wake him and tell him to step outside.

Loznevoi's face wore a sleepy, dejected expression. Throwing his greatcoat over his shoulders, he walked out on the porch, rubbing the strands of colourless hair that hung down over his forehead. A faint tremour of alarm went through him. Waiting for him on the steps was his chief of staff, Lieutenant Khmelko, a very young man with a gentle, almost boyish face. Loznevoi glanced at the east, where the dawn was spreading beyond the fog.

"What's happened?" he asked anxiously.

"I didn't want to go inside the house—" Khmelko began.

"Well, what's happened?"

"An order for you," Khmelko said hastily. "Immediate withdrawal."

Loznevoi took the paper.

"Where's Regiment Headquarters? In the old place?"

"It's left already. Moving farther back."

"Same route?"

"Yes."

Loznevoi folded the order and thrust it into the pocket of his breeches. Controlling his agitation, he took a breath and said in a toneless voice, "Well, Khmelko, get busy!"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

"We can feed the men on the road, can't we?"

"Yes. The kitchens are alight already."

Lieutenant Khmelko was free to go, but with a quick glance at his orderly he stepped closer to Loznevoi.

"The Germans are near," he breathed into his ear.

"Rumours?"

"Fact," Khmelko replied. "During the night refugees drove by. They were going like mad. They said the Germans have broken through on the main roads. Roaring past all the time—motorized troops. If we don't watch out we'll find ourselves in a mousetrap. The men have got to know about it. They're worried, and not sleeping. They keep wandering about the village."

"Well, that's all, Khmelko. Get busy!"

While Loznevoi had been talking to Khmelko the rest of the household had risen. Erofei Lopukhov was sitting at the table with a thoughtful expression on his face, scratching his flabby white chest. Andrei was bending down near the door, his broad shoulders heaving as he pulled on his boots. Kostya, already dressed, was sleepily rubbing his eyes and squinting into the fire. The two women were whispering near the stove. They were all alarmed at Loznevoi's being awakened at such an early hour, especially as he had been called out of the house.

Loznevoi walked into the best room. A minute later he appeared in the doorway without his greatcoat and with his belt in his hand.

"Are the horses fed?" he asked.

"The horses are all right," the orderly replied.

"Why so early?" Erofei asked.

"It's the army, Father!" Loznevoi gave his host a significant look and pulled his belt tight with one quick jerk. "The army."

"So you're going on?"

"Orders are orders, Father."

"What about breakfast?"

"I'll be back when I've seen the men off."

Andrei straightened up. In the faint light he seemed more tanned and stalwart than usual, wearing only a loose undershirt tucked into his trousers. He was refreshed after the bath and a good night's sleep, but his eyes were pensive and gloomy.

"Are we going now, Comrade Battalion Commander?" he asked.

"Yes, the men will be wakened in a moment," Loznevoi answered. "You've had a stroke of luck, Lopukhov," he remarked, walking to the door.

"How have I been lucky, Comrade Senior Lieuten ant?"

"Why, you've been home!"

"Call that luck!" Andrei replied bitterly, raising his voice. "It hurts, that kind of luck does—as though someone had whipped you with nettles. Do you think it's easy to retreat through your own yard?"

"But still you've seen your people. . . ."

"Yesterday I was drunk with happiness," Andrei replied, in a quieter voice. "And now it's the morning after."

For a few minutes after Loznevoi and his orderly left, a heavy silence reigned in the kitchen. They all had known that Andrei was to leave in the morning, but still his departure was unexpected. Erofei sat with his left arm on the table, his hand hanging limply over the edge. Alevtina and Maryika stood pressed close to each other in a dark corner faintly lit by the fire in the stove. From time to time they all cast silent glances at Andrei, who had begun to pack his modest soldier's belongings. Finally, with a strained feeling in his chest, Erofei said, "Well, take care of yourself, Andrei! Take care, son!"

"Everything will be all right, Dad. . . ."

"Make sure and use your head when you fight!"

A muffled sob came from the corner.

"Now then, you two!" Erofei roared at the women. "Bawling! Snivelling! There's nothing to cry about! What is he—a child? He's got a head of his own on his shoulders. He's clever now." And suddenly the feeling of resentment after yesterday's conversation on the

vegetable patch got the better of him, and he added, "He even teaches his father!"

Andrei looked up from his knapsack. "No, Dad, I haven't got clever yet," he said in a voice unexpectedly harsh. "I'm just learning. And you, Dad, you're staying here—mind you don't get too clever."

Erofei was taken aback. "Here—what do you mean?"

"If you do," Andrei said, "it'll be too late. And in times like this it's easy to get too clever."

His father stood up and pressed his broad beard to his chest. "Aha, so that's it! Well, now I see that you've grown up!"

How Andrei had wanted to sit peacefully with his family that morning! But peace in the household had been violated. A heavy, uneasy feeling hung in the Lopukhov house. "It's like a fug in here," Andrei thought. "It just weighs on my heart!" Throwing his greatcoat over his shoulders, he went out into the yard feeling depressed. It was the first time he had spoken so harshly to his father, and he felt it all the more because it had happened against his will and, as though to spite him, in the hour of parting.

Out in the yard his beloved birches were rustling, and their leaves were dropping to the ground. Under the shed a rooster flapped his wings and crowed. At the sight of his young master Chorny rose from the barn door, stretched himself and yawned loudly with a click of his teeth. A sparrow flitted out from under the shed and chirped a signal to its companions. Everything in the yard was just as it had been ever since he was a child.

Andrei wanted to be alone. He fondled Chorny and then walked the length of the yard, treading softly on the cold earth. The gate leading to the vegetable garden was damp from hoar-frost. He opened it, walked behind the shed and put his burning cheek to the wall.

Three months earlier Andrei had first experienced the sadness of parting with his home and his family. But then he had gone to the west, to meet the war, leaving his dear ones in safety far behind. Now he was going east, leaving them at the mercy of the enemy. What would happen to the family? What would happen to Maryika? At the thought of leaving home for the second time a wave of pain and dread swept over Andrei. . . .

* VII *

Again Andrei marched east.

During the night the autumn chill had nipped all the remaining vegetation in the fields, robbing them of their last summer colours. Everything was dead and forlorn. Only once Andrei caught a flash of red among the scanty weeds on a hillside as a fox scurried away. Against the grey deserted fields the woods were vivid splashes of scarlet. At sunrise the wind got up again. The falling leaves began to rustle. The wind swept them eastward in clouds. And again Andrei felt, with fresh poignancy, the loss of everything that was so dear to him.

Maryika accompanied him a long way out of the village.

Falling behind the battalion, they walked alone together. They did not want to talk of parting: indeed, they were afraid even to mention it. They walked along in silence. Only now and then, to rid themselves of their thoughts, did they exchange a few words, words that had little meaning at that moment. Chorny trotted at their heels.

They stopped beside a little bridge over a stream, beyond which stood a dense grove of young birches. Andrei took Maryika's hands in his. Her face was calm and set as it had been all the morning, but now a flush had risen in her cheeks. She stared fixedly at Andrei; in her

dark eyes there flickered reflections of the sun, the sky and the scarlet leaves flying past. She lowered her gaze.

"Well, that's all, Andrei darling, that's all," she said softly and simply.

Swiftly Andrei drew her to him.

"Maryika, my little swallow!"

"Now go!" she said, her lips barely moving.

"My little bird!"

"And remember—I'll be waiting!" she suddenly said in a louder voice, and unable to fight down her grief, pressed closer to her husband.

Andrei felt one of her tears drop on his hand—and a gust of hot wind seemed to strike him full in the face. He pressed Maryika to him and said quietly, "I will come back, Maryika. Do you hear?"

Suddenly he gently pushed her from him, and for the first time she saw how painful it was for him to leave her.

"Andrei darling, go!" she said with a frightened cry through her tears.

Andrei crossed the bridge in one quick stride. Maryika stood gazing after him motionless, unable to wave her hand in farewell. . . .

Deep within the grove on the other side of the stream he stopped to adjust his knapsack and heard a noise behind him. He turned around to see Chorny loping along, his pink tongue flashing.

"Where do you think you're going?" Andrei shouted at the dog.

Chorny ran up and began to fawn at Andrei's feet.

"Oh, you bad dog!" Andrei said in a softer tone. "I'm going far away! Far, far away! Understand? And I don't know when I'll come back. Understand? Go home!"

But Chorny would not go away. He frolicked around Andrei, looking up at him with affectionate, yearning eyes. Suddenly Andrei felt terrified at the thought that he was

actually leaving home—for a long time, perhaps even forever.

"Chorny," he whispered. "You go to Maryika. Go! Ah, Chorny!" He suddenly dropped to his knees and hugged the dog, shouting at the top of his voice, "Chorny dear! Chorny!"

But a second later, remembering himself, he pushed the dog away.

"Off with you! Get going!"

Chorny gave his master a surprised, injured look.

"Off with you!"

Chorny slunk silently into the bushes. Without looking back, Andrei set out quickly eastward along the forest road.

* VIII *

Loznevoi was badly upset by the rumours that the Germans were advancing rapidly along the main roads. Danger was close on their heels. Obviously, that day or the next there would be an engagement—Loznevoi's first. He wondered what fate had in store for him.

Major Voloshin's regiment, of which Loznevoi's battalion was a part, had only been formed at the end of the summer. It had been in training at Opochka, on the river Velikaya, and its battle course had been far from completed when, on October 3, the nazi armies broke through the Red Army's Western Front and advanced on Moscow. Voloshin's regiment, a part of General Borodin's division, came under the command of the Nth Army HQ, which was withdrawing to the Rzhev region. During the week's retreat to Olkhovka, Voloshin had not had to fight a single engagement. The enemy was trying to enclose the Nth Army in a pincer movement, while the Nth Army, on orders from Front Headquarters, was withdrawing hastily eastward.

But now Loznevoi felt it in his bones that a clash with the enemy was inevitable.

That morning Loznevoi observed his men more attentively than usual as he stood on a mound, his hands folded behind his back, watching the battalion march out of Olkhovka. From under the peak of his cap his keen grey eyes vigilantly examined the rows of soldiers. He saw that the soldiers were worn out by the retreat, with its endless marches, sleepless nights and constant alarms and worries. Their uniforms were shabby and faded and reeked of sweat. Their bodies were thin, their faces weatherbeaten and peeling. They looked about them with sullen, uneasy glances.

Loznevoi heaved a sigh and set out for the Lopukhov house.

Kostya was saddling the horses. In the house Erofei could be heard talking in a loud, angry voice. Loznevoi paused near the steps and threw his orderly an inquiring glance.

"He's in a rage," Kostya said in a mocking tone. "Showing the missus his temper."

At the sound of footsteps on the porch Erofei quietened down. When Loznevoi and Kostya entered the house he was pacing the best room, his boots squeaking. His face was dark and his beard disordered. His wife lay prostrate on the bed. By her side, bristling with indignation, sat Vasya. He was smoothing her wispy, uncombed hair.

Erofei seated the guests at the table and then nodded towards the bed:

"Look—she saw him off and now she's taken to her bed. That's what it is to see a son off! It's like tearing a chunk out of your heart!"

He went into the kitchen and looked into the stove.

"It's in the roasting pot," his wife called in a faint voice, without moving.

"I know. Lie still."

He brought in a pot of mutton and began to lay the table. Loznevoi glanced round the room.

"Why are you serving?" he asked. "What about your daughter-in-law?"

"She went to see him off."

"I didn't notice them."

"They went by themselves. Down past the village."

"Yes, she loves him," Loznevoi said, unable to forget Maryika.

"Who can tell?" Erofei responded evasively as he pressed a loaf of bread to his broad chest and cut off thick slices. "I can't understand the women nowadays. One minute they love you, but just move out of sight and they stop. Not women but windmills!"

"What's that you're saying?" Alevtina moaned. "Don't talk like that!"

"That's enough from you! You think you know more than anybody else, don't you! I've seen enough of you women! They gave you freedom and then you went and took advantage of it. You don't love a man—you throw dust in his eyes!"

Erofei took half a bottle of vodka from the cupboard and poured it out into tea-cups. Then he moved one of the cups to the corner of the table for himself.

"That's all that's left," he said. "I wanted to treat my son but he wouldn't touch it: he must be feeling bitter enough as it is."

They ate in silence for a minute. And then, as if following up a conversation already started, Loznevoi asked, "So you've decided not to leave?" He looked at his host with narrowed eyes which, now that his face was unshaven and it was light in the room, had lost their sharp steely glint.

"Where have I to go to?" Erofei replied in a loud voice. "Look at my old woman! She's all right about the house, but just take her a mile away and that'll be the

end of her. How can she leave? If anything happened on the way it would be the end of her—and of me too. Why, she's falling to pieces! Before, it was different. She could do the work of two!"

"Aren't you afraid?"

"To stay here? Huh! We'll die anyway. Better here than on the road. It's easier to die at home. And, anyhow, where is there to go? Can you tell me that? Before you have time to look round, *they*'ll be on your tail, with tanks! It'd be just havoc. By the by, ours are retreating pretty hastily, aren't they?"

"What else is there to do?" replied Loznevoi sullenly.

Kostya was surprised that Loznevoi seemed in no hurry to leave. After he had finished his breakfast Loznevoi walked up to the mirror.

"Oho!" he exclaimed, feeling his chin.

"Yes, it wouldn't hurt," Kostya agreed.

"Give me my razor."

But at that moment Loznevoi picked up his field bag, pulled out a pair of hair clippers and placed them in front of Kostya.

"Start with my head," he ordered.

"Your head as well?" Kostya asked in surprise.

"While we're at it." Loznevoi fingered the thin strands of mousy hair over his forehead. "Fine curls these! Just to make people laugh!"

"You shouldn't," Lopukhov attempted to dissuade him. "No matter what his hair is like, it does give a man something to show."

"That's all right. Shave away, Kostya!"

Loznevoi spent about an hour in the Lopukhov's house. Then he stepped out on the porch and raised his binoculars to his eyes. After the shave his face was noticeably fresher, but it remained cold and set—the face of a man deep in thought. Even the abundant sunlight did not soften it. For a minute or so Loznevoi looked at the

country road running east. The battalion had already disappeared from sight in the birch grove on the other side of the stream. Suddenly he smiled—a shadow of a smile, with the left cheek only.

"Have they gone far?" Kostya asked.

"My horse," Loznevoi said, quickly walking down the steps.

Before they reached the stream they met Maryika returning home. She was walking slowly, her head lowered. Chorny trailed after her dejectedly. The wind was tossing dry leaves under their feet. Nodding to Kostya to ride on, Loznevoi stopped in the middle of the road.

Maryika had recognized Loznevoi from a distance but now she pretended not to, and stepped off the road. Reining in, Loznevoi turned his horse sideways. He sat his saddle expertly, with his elbows slightly raised and the skirts of his trench coat thrown out. He pushed back his cap and, as his eyes caught the sun, they softened and became kinder.

"Seen him off?"

Maryika was slow to reply. She stared at the Battalion Commander as though she still did not recognize him.

"What of it?" she said at last.

"And he went?"

Maryika flushed. "How could he not go?" she said with a note of hostility in her voice.

"Of course," Loznevoi spoke in a conciliatory tone. "He and I will get on well together. Perhaps I shall make him my orderly. I can see he's a good soldier. Another man probably wouldn't have left"—he paused—"wouldn't have left such a wife."

Maryika threw Loznevoi a hostile glance and started to move round his horse, but again he blocked her way.

"One word!" he said quickly. "Wish me luck. The way you did your husband. I'm not superstitious, but I feel a word from you will mean a lot. . . ."

Maryika caught a broad jagged maple leaf as it floated past. She held it in her palm a few seconds, examining the pattern of veins under the transparent scarlet surface. Then, not looking up at Loznevoi, she threw the leaf over her shoulder with a careless gesture and said, just as casually, "Well, good luck."

"And best wishes?"

"Yes."

"That's all," Loznevoi replied. "Thank you. Now I know that I'm carrying my luck right in my pocket."

With a nod to Maryika, Loznevoi spurred his horse. On the other side of the stream he turned round, gazed after Maryika, smiled with the left side of his face and then rode on. . . .

* IX *

After Olkhovka it was even harder going. The sun had scarcely begun to warm the earth before the air was filled with the drone of large groups of Junkers coming over from the west. At times it was difficult for the eye to pick them out in the dazzling vault of the autumn sky, but at the dreary, insistent whine of their engines the men's hearts contracted spasmodically. Then came the bombing. Again, as on the previous day, the earth sighed heavily and shuddered, and here and there thick ragged columns of acrid black smoke spurted up, as though from the fiery bowels of the earth. The wind drove the smoke eastward along with the fallen leaves. Suddenly rapacious little Messerschmitts swooped down on the roads with a savage high-pitched whine, and people rushed to the sides in terror to escape the vicious bird-like chatter of explosive bullets.

At noon Loznevoi's battalion halted in a small wood. The Commander of the Regiment, Major Voloshin, galloped up on a sweating bay stallion. He was accompanied

by his deputy, Captain Ozerov, and a group of sub-machine gunners, all of them tanned young fellows. Having learned from the men where Loznevoi was, they made their way in single file through the wood to its western fringe, their horses' hoofs crunching on the fallen branches and leaves.

Meanwhile Loznevoi lay in his light field tent, pitched under a young oak; the wind was fluttering the ragged foliage on the crooked branches of the tree. As the windy October day wore on Loznevoi was growing more and more uneasy. Every minute he expected something important to happen. And when Kostya hurriedly reported that the Regiment Commander had arrived, Loznevoi realized that this something was about to happen. He sprang to his feet and quickly stepped out of the tent.

Major Voloshin was a big man in his late forties with a heavy, coarsened body. He had been in the army since the spring of 1918. As a machine-gunner he had fought the Whiteguards on the Volga, had taken part in the liberation of Kazan and then had participated in the heroic march into the heart of Siberia against Kolchak. For valorous action in those years he had been decorated with the Order of the Red Banner. Soldier Voloshin had found army service greatly to his liking, and decided to remain in the army for life. He had been in command of an infantry regiment several years now, and he was proud of his calling.

A glance at the Regiment Commander from a distance told Loznevoi that Voloshin was seriously worried. "Things must be bad," Loznevoi reflected. "Really bad!"

Major Voloshin jumped heavily to the ground and with an annoyed wave of his hand cut short Loznevoi's report. Breathing hard, he dropped the reins and walked wearily over to Loznevoi's tent, throwing open his trench coat. He wiped his sweating forehead under the rim of his helmet.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "All broken up."

"Sit over here," Loznevoi invited.

Settling himself on an ammunition box under the oak, Mayor Voloshin again wiped his forehead and temples with a handkerchief without removing his helmet.

For a minute he puffed greedily at his cigarette. The sound of the wind filled the wood. It was mingled with the voices of soldiers, the snorting of horses, the ring of an axe against a tree and the cries of magpies, who were everywhere heralding autumn. Invisible aircraft droned in the spacious pale blue sky. Somewhere in the distance bombs were falling; there was a muffled pounding inside the earth, like an irregular heart beat. Voloshin coughed and threw his cigarette away.

"Ozerov, come here!" he called out.

Capitain Ozerov, Second-in-Command of the Regiment, smoothed his horse's mane, said something to the sub-machine gunners and walked up to the tent with firm, vigorous steps. He, too, was a big man, with the plain, slightly pock-marked face of one born and bred in Siberia. He was wearing an open padded jacket.

"Seen the Commissar?" Voloshin asked him.

"No, Comrade Major, I haven't."

"Well, it's good I met you at least. I need you badly."

"Something new?"

"Yes. Got a map?"

Captain Ozerov opened his map case. Taking the map, Major Voloshin motioned to his Second and the Battalion Commander to sit down. They quickly settled themselves, Ozerov on a box and Loznevoi on his saddle. Meanwhile the Major adjusted his glasses on his broad fleshy nose, then glanced about him.

Loznevoi understood. "Don't worry," he said. "There's no one near."

Major Voloshin studied the map intently for a long time through his glasses.

"Aha, here it is!" His pencil stopped on a little green spot. "We're here, aren't we? How far is it to the river Vazuza?"

"About fifteen miles," Ozerov replied.

"Correct." Voloshin looked up from the map. "Well, this is the situation. As you see, two main roads converge towards the bridge over the Vazuza." He moved his hand in one direction and then in the other. "One is here and the other there. Two big columns of Germans are moving along these roads, going all out for the bridge."

"Are they far away?" Loznevoi put in cautiously.

"Unfortunately, we don't really know," Voloshin replied. "Division Headquarters apparently has no definite information." He paused, compressing his thick lips. "Now, our whole division is moving along country roads between these two main roads, following other units. It should reach the Vazuza tonight, ahead of the Germans. If it does, well and good. But that's not all. The main task of our regiment is something quite different."

Again he looked about warily, then he said in a very quiet voice:

"We shan't go as far as the Vazuza—" He drew the pencil over the map with an unsteady hand. "Our regiment will stop here," he said. Then, noticing that his hand was shaking, he lifted it from the map. "There's a tight bottleneck at the crossing. They say the place is packed with troops and refugees. Now, our main task is to make a stand and hold up the German columns until all the other units, including two regiments of our division, are across the river. We can't go until last. Do you understand what we have got to do?" He looked sternly at Ozerov and Loznevoi. "We have to hold out to the end. To the last man. Die, but save the others. Is that clear?"

During the whole week of the retreat Loznevoi had been expecting sudden, grim events, but he had never

expected that their regiment would be doomed to certain death to save other units. Horror overcame him; he felt an icy chill grip his chest, as though a fierce Siberian blast had pierced it.

"Yes, quite clear," he replied, without hearing his own voice.

And Ozerov, too, snapping his map case shut, answered, "Well, we'll hold out." He glanced up at Voloshin with eyes that for some reason had turned an intense blue.

Major Voloshin was about to show Loznevoi the line his battalion was to hold, but at that moment the nerve-racking whine of an aircraft engine reached their ears.

"Down!" shouted Ozerov.

They all went flat on the ground. The aircraft skimmed over the wood, almost brushing the tree-tops with its wings. A few seconds later voices at the edge of the wood cried, "It's crashed! It's crashed!"

A hubbub broke out. Shouting to one another, soldiers dashed out into the field. Shots rang out.

* X *

Before long the captured German pilot, in a torn flying suit with a shiny zip-fastener down the front, was led up to Loznevoi's tent. He was tall and as thin as a reed, but with an energetic face. Holding his hands behind his back, he stopped near the oak and looked about him calmly, even brazenly, tossing back his dishevelled forelock. He seemed not the least embarrassed at having been taken prisoner. Apparently, he held everyone he saw round the oak in such scorn that he had no fear of them.

This was the first time Major Voloshin had seen a nazi in the flesh. He was shocked by the man's brazen self-assurance.

"Well, you bastard? What are you looking at us like that for? he shouted, his corpulent body quivering violently.

The German lifted his head a bit higher. A scornful smile flitted across his lips. Voloshin tore his glasses from his nose and looked at the German with big owlish eyes turning bloodshot with rage.

"What's your name?" he shouted, furiously clenching his big fists. "Talk, you bastard! Well?"

The German looked at the Regiment Commander even more brazenly.

"You won't talk, eh? So you won't talk?"

Shaking his fists and advancing on the German, Major Voloshin tried for another minute or so to make him speak, but in reply to all his questions the latter only twisted his lips in a disdainful smile; now and then he brushed aside his dishevelled forelock. He was not the least afraid. Sweat began to trickle down Voloshin's cheeks. He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and turned away.

"The bastard doesn't understand a thing!"

"May I?" Ozerov asked.

Voloshin suddenly recollected. "Why, that's right!" he said. "You speak German, don't you? Well, have a try!"

The German had meanwhile pulled a shiny little harmonica out of his pocket. He ran it tentatively along his lips; soft, melodious notes came out. Disregarding the men around him, he began to play a tune. Ozerov glanced at the German and his face went suddenly dark; the pockmarks stood out distinctly. He took a step forward and shouted in a voice that made the air tremble:

"*Stillgestanden*!"

The German raised his eyes for a second and then went on playing. At this Ozerov took another step forward and shot his fist out in a furious blow that caught the man

under the ribs. The German flung up his arms with a groan and hit the ground beside a hazel bush; his harmonica flew still farther.

"*Aufstehen*!" Ozerov shouted.

The German sprang to attention beside the bush, his eyes round with fear.

"That shook him!" a voice exclaimed from a clump of bushes not far away.

"Your name?" Ozerov suddenly asked in Russian.

"Kurt Krause," the German answered in a guttural voice.

"Aha, so you understand Russian," Ozerov remarked. "Do you see?" he said, addressing Major Voloshin—but it was clear he wanted the soldiers peering through the bushes to hear him too. "When you start beating these nazis their haughtiness and arrogance fall off like a shell and they show themselves for what they really are." Chopping the air with his arm, he repeated, "We have to beat them! Beat them! Then they'll understand who they are dealing with!"

"It is quite useless!" said Kurt Krause. "The German army is invincible!"

"Oh, is it!" Ozerov's face had brightened. Now it was he who was gazing scornfully at the German. "And may I ask why you are standing here? Weren't you shot down by one of our aircraft?"

Kurt Krause lowered his head and did not reply.

"You were covering the columns moving along the main roads to the bridge," Ozerov said. "That we know. Perhaps you'll say it isn't true?"

"No, that is true."

"When are they to reach the bridge?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Don't lie!" Ozerov shouted.

Major Voloshin, who had been standing in the background for some time, was in a hurry to give Loznevoi

his final instructions and head for the Vazuza. He decided to get the interrogation over.

"Tomorrow, you say?" he asked, stepping forward.

"Tomorrow morning," Krause repeated. "As far as I know."

"Well, that's all!" Voloshin commanded. "We've done with you!"

Kurt Krause shuddered.

"Are you going to kill me?" he asked quietly.

"Kill you? What for?" Ozerov said scornfully. "No, you will live. You will be given an opportunity to live to see the defeat of your nazi Germany. You'll—"

"Ozerov, stop!" Voloshin shouted. "That's enough."

Then the Major called over Loznevoi, who had been standing near the oak all the time, the peak of his cap drawn low over his eyes.

"Where are they—those m n of yours?" he asked.

"Here, Comrade Major!"

"Let's see them!"

Out of the hazel bushes stepped a sergeant carrying a rifle, followed by four soldiers. The Sergeant was a tall, swarthy man with a slight stoop; he was the silent woodsman type, the kind who seem born to stalk animals in the taiga. Rather from his bearing and his self-possessed glance at the Regiment Commander than from his age, one could see at once that he had been in the army a long time and had become fully accustomed to the rigours of a soldier's life.

"Your name?" Voloshin asked.

The Sergeant waited a second, his bold brown eyes surveying the Major, and then answered unhurriedly, without raising his voice, "Yurgin, Comrade Major."

"A Siberian?"

"That's right. From the Yenisei."

"Did he return your fire?"

"Yes, for a bit," Yurgin replied unwillingly.

"Good men!" Voloshin said, addressing the others as well as Yurgin. "On behalf of the service, I thank you for your bravery!" The soldiers replied to the commendation.

"Now take him away," Voloshin said. "Over there, a bit farther. And guard him. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Comrade Major!" Yurgin saluted unhurriedly.

Kurt Krause was led away.

"Send him to Division Headquarters," Voloshin ordered.

After that the Major did not stay much longer. Smoothing out the rumpled map on the box, he finally showed Loznevoi where his battalion was to take up defence.

"Verkhovsky's and Bolotin's battalions," he explained, "will straddle the main roads and hold back the German columns, while you will take up your position in the centre, between the main roads, along these low wooded ridges. . . ."

Controlling his agitation, Loznevoi began to mark up his map. The map swam before his eyes: the signs, numbers, green spots and names of villages seemed to be crawling over it like living creatures eluding the poisonous blue of his pencil.

"Stop!" Voloshin exclaimed. "What are you marking?"

"Oh, yes! Excuse me, Comrade Major."

"Now listen to me, Battalion Commander," continued Voloshin, "you've got to take up that line, dig in and stand firm! Unless ordered—not a step back!" The Major's voice rang out firmly. "Die, but don't budge. Fight to the last man!"

After pointing out on the map the place where he intended to set up his command post, Major Voloshin quickly mounted his horse and galloped out of the wood with his sub-machine gunners.

This meeting with Major Voloshin was the most important event Loznevoi had experienced in recent days. When he had seen the Regiment Commander off, he called his adjutant, Lieutenant Khmelko. The latter had long been awaiting this summons, impatient to learn the news. He ran quickly up to the Battalion Commander with his light boyish step, his spurs jangling, and saluted. Loznevoi was toying with a handful of ripe acorns.

"Do you know what we are?" he asked in a low voice without looking at Khmelko.

"No, what?"

Loznevoi scattered the acorns on the leafy ground and, walking past Khmelko, whispered in his ear, "A suicide battalion!"

* XI *

Pushing aside the branch of a hazel bush, Captain Ozerov caught sight of Matvei Yurgin. The swarthy, taciturn sergeant was squatting on his heels at the edge of a leaf-strewn pool surrounded by fir and birch stumps. He was cleaning his sooty mess-tin with a bunch of wet sedge.

"Hullo there, fellow Siberian!" Ozerov called genially.

Yurgin put his mess-tin down, rose and fixed his self-assured glance on the approaching Captain.

"You from Siberia too, Comrade Captain?" he asked.

"Yes. Only I come from the Ob River region."

Yurgin smiled. "Oh, so we're neighbours!"

"Go on with what you were doing, don't stop," Ozerov said. He came up to the pool and sat down on a tree-stump. Yurgin sat down opposite him and took up his bunch of sedge.

"Away from home long?" Ozerov asked.

"Yes. I'm serving an extra term."

"How did you get into this regiment?"

"Out of hospital."

"Were you wounded?"

"Just a scratch at the beginning...."

Ozerov picked up a twig and drove a few leaves away from the middle of the pool. In the open space green spikes of sedge sticking up from the bottom straightened out. Finely-minted spangles of sunlight from the rays breaking through the leaves of a nearby birch fell on the smooth dark bottom of the pool.

"Are you a member of the Party?"

"Yes. Since spring."

"What did you do in Siberia?"

"On a collective farm of course—hunted in the taiga."

"Squirrels?"

"Most of the time."

"Plenty of them in your Yenisei region."

"Millions!"

They fell silent for a while. Yurgin diligently scoured the scorched bottom of his mess-tin with earth. The voices in the wood died down—the men were evidently resting after dinner. From both flanks the distant rumble of guns came over in waves. At times the earth gave a faint tremour, and the green prongs of sedge quivered in the pool.

"Well, not fed up yet?" Ozerov asked.

"Not fed up with what?" Yurgin rejoined, on his guard.

"Retreating."

With chagrin Yurgin threw the crushed bunch of sedge into the pool. "More than fed up, Comrade Captain! It's breaking my heart!"

"Look, neighbour, now you tell me this—" Ozerov glanced behind him and then continued in a lower voice. "Why are the men so afraid of the Germans, eh? Why? What's the reason?"

"Who's afraid?"

"Lots of people are."

"I shouldn't say so," Yurgin objected calmly. "Very few, Comrade Captain. No, there's no particular fear of the Germans. If a man's a rabbit, of course, he'll even be scared of his own shadow."

"Why does panic break out so easily, then?"

"That's because of the tanks and planes, Comrade Captain. The men aren't afraid of the Germans—that goes without saying—but they are a bit afraid of their tanks and planes, that's a fact. Many of them haven't seen a real engagement yet, haven't even been under fire, and those planes they.... Their whine is enough to make you shiver, loose your head, damn them! And we—may I say it?"

"Of course, speak up."

"We haven't got much equipment, Comrade Captain, that's the trouble!" Yurgin nodded towards his rifle, which was in a dry spot, leaning against a fir tree. "What use are they against a tank? Tanks are not their game. And those fire bottles—may I?"

"Speak up, don't be afraid!"

"I'm not afraid." Yurgin smiled with only his lips. "When the men start talking about the bottles, I praise them myself. You can set a tank on fire with them—and they do flare up! But all the same, those bottles are a poor man's weapon. They're not the real thing."

Ozerov listened, watching the leaves he had scattered float back toward the middle of the little pool. Then he lashed out at the water with his twig.

"Wait a while, neighbour! We'll have everything we need! Everything!"

"I'm sure we shall."

"Tanks and planes! Everything! Only wait a while!"

"That's all right, we'll wait," Yurgin promised.

"And meanwhile you've got to burn tanks with fire bottles!"

"That's about it, I suppose. We'll do it!" Yurgin paused, glanced at Ozerov and then continued more spiritedly, "Even with the weapons we have, Comrade Captain, we could fight better, but there's another catch. It's just beyond me! Look at how far we've retreated, how much land and property we've left behind, how much want we've suffered, and still there are lots of people who haven't got their dander up yet. Not yet even! They're beginning to little by little, but that's all. I can see that. But when they get their dander up—then look out! It's like in a beehive. . . . A bear sticks his paw into the hive, and the bees all rush out. And at first, before they can make out what's happened—what a swarming and a buzzing there is! But when they see the bear is cleaning out the hive—then it starts! They fasten on to that bear, and it's as much as he can do to run away from them. Beg your pardon, Comrade Captain—maybe I don't see it right?"

Ozerov stood up.

"Well, you've gladdened my heart," he said. "You see things right, quite right!" The Captain lowered his eyes. "Hate is the strongest weapon. So far we haven't got enough of that either. But that weapon, Yurgin, won't be sent up to us from the rear. We have to forge it ourselves, as we go. Understand? You remember that."

"I understand," Yurgin said.

"And now, neighbour, take your rifle and let's go. Where's that German? We have to send him to headquarters. I'll call some men. Is he far away?"

"He's just over here. This way!"

Kurt Krause was sitting in a clearing under a little linden with dark bark. In front of him stood a new green mess-tin filled with a thick stew of noodles. All around sat soldiers, looking on with curiosity as the prisoner worked away with a spoon, making no effort to conceal his greediness.

"Go on, eat!" said Andrei, noticing how the prisoner was staring into the mess-tin. "If it's not enough I'll bring some more. Eat!"

"He certainly can put it away!" a soldier by the name of Degtyarev remarked in wonder.

"Not half!" a man called Umrikhin confirmed. "Amazing!"

"And he's as thin as a rail."

Matvei Yurgin pushed through the bushes and strode into the clearing, followed by Captain Ozerov.

"'Ten-shun!"

A minute later two sub-machine gunners led Krause away.

"Who brought that?" Ozerov asked, with a glance at the mess-tin lying under the tree.

Andrei took a pace forward. "I did, Comrade Captain!"

"Tell me—were you ordered to feed him?"

Andrei did not reply.

"Is he on the rations list already?"

"He asked for something to eat," Andrei replied, restraining a sigh.

"Ah, I see," Captain Ozerov said softly. "And so you felt sorry for him. You've got a kind heart, haven't you?" Ozerov raised his voice. "Why, of course!" he said mockingly. "He's tired! He's been flying over the roads and killing our people all the morning!" Ozerov's face suddenly darkened, and again the pock-marks stood out sharply. "Why were you so kind to that murderer? Why?"

A flush spread rapidly over Andrei's cheeks. He looked straight at Captain Ozerov, but he was so upset he did not hear what the other was saying. The Captain moved closer and closer to Andrei, staring fixedly at him with eyes a blazing blue under his lowered brows.

* XII *

Small fresh bomb craters gaped on both sides of the dirt road leading over the bare, wind-swept hillock; around them scorched lumps of earth lay scattered about the dusty, trampled grass. It looked as though someone with a huge drill had tried to bore through the hillock in many places but had failed. By the roadside and among the bomb craters lay dead horses, the remains of peasant carts, and scraps of harness. The wind, which had dropped a little since noon, blew gently over this mournful spot.

"He dropped a packet here!" Andrei exclaimed, shaking his head.

"No, must have been more than one of them," Matvei Yurgin said after looking round. "Look at what they did, damn their rotten souls!"

"I can't make out what's going on!"

"Why not? Take a look!"

"What kind of war is this?"

"Yes, it doesn't look like war. It's plain murder!"

Their platoon was marching in the van of the column, behind the forward patrol. As they passed over the bare, crater-torn hillock the men looked about them in silence. The road curved gently and began to dip towards a dark fir grove. And so their way led, from grove to grove; for the Rzhev countryside is richly embroidered with an ingenious forest pattern. The sun was already past its zenith. Light-grey clouds driven from the horizon by the wind rose steeply in the pale sky. After working hard since early morning the wind was completing its daily task with flagging enthusiasm. Now the trees in the forest rustled not in unison but in turn: after the leaves of a birch had fluttered a neighbouring linden swished dryly, then, when its turn came, an oak stirred its reddish locks.

On either side of the road at the edge of the grove rose grave-mounds of dark earth. On them stood fresh,

hastily-made crosses. On one of the graves the cross was only slightly higher than a nearby birch stump which had sent out young shoots that summer. Andrei realized that these were the graves of the people who had met their death on the mound. No one was about in this unexpected little graveyard but, further ahead, women's kerchiefs could be seen among the bushes, and voices and the barking of a dog could be heard.

"Yes, they won't do any more travelling," Yurgin remarked grimly.

He turned to the soldiers and opened his mouth to shout something to them, but instead clamped his lips tight and marched on. The men cast dark glances at the graves. They marched past in silence, their mess-tins and helmets jangling.

Inside the grove, behind a clump of buckthorn, Andrei caught sight of a cart in which a black lamb lay fastened with rope. She was stretching out her neck to reach a branch with a few little greenish-gold leaves on it.

"They must be some of ours!" Andrei exclaimed. "I'll run over!"

"From Olkhovka?" queried Yurgin.

Our collective-farm people, Comrade Sergeant!"

"Go and see them then. . . ."

The previous evening Andrei had looked on with bitterness and anguish as the Olkhovka collective farmers, frightened by the swift and sudden withdrawal of the army, fled from their native village. In the course of the evening he had run into some of his neighbours who were preparing for the forced journey to the east. One of them had been Stepan Boyarkin, the chairman of the collective farm. Boyarkin was to leave as leader of the last group. Among the various belongings in the back of Boyarkin's cart had been a little black lamb.

Andrei plunged through the bushes. The shafts of the cart were spread wide apart, and the saddle strap

and reins lay on the grass. A little farther away, on a rough carpet of bilberries in a small clearing, a sorrel horse lay on its side, its head awkwardly thrown back. Stepan Boyarkin, a tall, raw-boned man of about forty with an unhealthy, clean-shaven face, was squatting on his heels near the horse's head. At the sound of a stranger approaching the cart he rose, and, recognizing Andrei, waved his hand despondently. "Well, that's the end of him!" he said.

The working jacket that Stepan Boyarkin wore was unbuttoned and his fair head was bare. He had only one boot on, his left trouser leg had been slit and rolled up over the knee, and his thin calf hastily bound with a strip of sacking, now blood-stained.

"Seen what they did to us?" Boyarkin called out as he limped over to the cart.

"Were they all from our village, Uncle Stepan?"

"No, from different places. Hardly any from Olkhovka. But there were some. . . ."

"When did it happen?"

"This morning."

Andrei was amazed at the change that had come over Stepan Boyarkin in a single day. Boyarkin had long been suffering from a stomach ulcer, but now his pale cheeks were more sunken than ever, as though he had starved for days; his cheek-bones and lips protruded, and his light hazel eyes looked out from their large shadowy sockets with fierce intensity. The past twenty-four hours had exacted a heavy toll from Stepan Boyarkin. The day before he had been utterly worn out by the arrangements for evacuating the collective farmers and the inevitable confusion it entailed. There had been other worries to harass him. He had been angry because the great hurry had forced him to leave without taking care of certain necessary matters before departing from Olkhovka. There was his family whom with a heavy heart he had left

behind in the village: his old mother, a paralyzed invalid, was near to death, and his wife had remained to lighten her last days. And now today a fresh calamity and fresh worries. . . . But exhausted though Stepan Boyarkin was, there was something in his appearance that suggested a great renewal: either he had learned during the past twenty-four hours something he had long been trying in vain to learn, or else he had achieved some joyful, invigorating and encouraging moral victory.

"You see, this was how it happened," he began, rolling up the reins. "Even with all the running around yesterday I barely finished those jobs by nightfall. And how can you start out at night? We left at dawn. We reached this place, and here, the devil only knows why, we all came out on that open spot at one time. You see, everybody was rushing! And just when that pack of women reached the top of the hillock the planes came over. And in one swoop they swept it clean! Everybody who was able to, rode away as fast as he could. Most of them scattered into the woods. Well, we reached this place. . . . My horse took the bit between his teeth and got as far as this, and then the poor old thing's legs gave way under him. A bullet had got him in the side. Now sit here and whistle! And just for spite a bullet nicked my leg. Now what good am I with one leg? As if they couldn't see what kind of column it was! They knew it was just women and children! Why, one of them flew over so low he nearly hit my shaft bow! Shooting down women and children—what do you call that?"

"Who was killed?" Andrei asked, feeling a sudden heat in his veins.

"All women. And one girl, too. She was from our village."

"Whose girl?"

"Ulyana Shutyaeva's."

"Little Valya? That little blonde girl?"

"That's the one."

"No, Uncle Stepan, no!"

"Yes. I picked up the pieces myself."

Andrei turned his face away to the cart. "Don't tell me any more!"

Catching Andrei's sleeve Boyarkin pushed his gaunt face forward and said through his teeth, with a burning intensity that he could scarcely control, "Listen now. Everything inside me is on fire. Burning me!" He took a deep breath, and suddenly his voice became loud, almost shrill, "I'm not going any farther! How can I on one leg. Besides, as I see it, there's no need to. Have you got to hit them in the face? What about the back? Why is that any worse? I'm not going anywhere, Andrei! I'll get some men together—and we'll make it so hot for them here they'll yell holy murder! We'll make them squeal, all right! They'll curse the day they ever came here! They'll bathe in blood!"

Boyarkin said this with such force and intense anger that a flush spread over his cheeks and tears began to glisten in his blazing eyes. At that moment it again occurred to Andrei that before him was an altogether different Stepan Boyarkin from the one he had known even the day before. He was a completely renewed man, with a renewed face and a renewed heart. . . .

* XIII *

"Dig in here," said Yurgin.

"The earth is hard," Andrei remarked.

"So much the better. The earth is our protection."

Andrei looked up as he tugged his entrenching tool out of its case. Before him lay a strip of virgin meadow with a thick covering of grass. Clumps of frost-blackened thistle stood out against the rusty grey of the grass, and also a circle of trampled, withering scrub in which

a handful of amber-coloured linden and birch leaves were caught. Beyond the meadow a rolling field of fallow spread to the west; at the far end fir groves rose over the field like little islands; behind them, as always nowadays, great clouds of smoke darkened the sky.

Andrei tried the edge of the spade with his finger and glanced backward to the east. On a gradual slope scarred with gullies stood a golden grove of tiny birches which only that summer had outstripped the grass in height; beyond, a freshly-ploughed field lay black; then came strips of whitish stubble, and past the low hills a ridge of woods in autumn dress was pierced by the slanting rays of the sun. The day was fading in a calm. In the woods the fall of leaves was hushed.

Andrei had marched away from Olkhovka more depressed than when he had approached it the day before. Home and family and places beloved from childhood had been left behind. With all his soul he had felt the bitterness of losing what was part of him; and having felt this he realized with special clarity how bitter it was for all the others who were now moving eastwards. Now he saw the world through different eyes.

He surveyed the place where the battalion had halted; it was full of the rugged and majestic beauty of the North. And again Andrei felt, as he had the day before on the Olkhovka hill, that he could see not only the spread of land before his eyes, but the whole broad expanse of his country. And suddenly he realized that he could go no farther eastward—he simply could not! "How much longer will this retreat go on?" he thought wildly. "How much farther? Here's where to stop and make a stand!" He began to dig with a quick, sure swing.

Andrei worked with a will, and every minute increased his hope that the enemy would be stopped at this line. Occasionally he glanced round. The entire battalion was working rapidly and silently. It was spread out across

fields of stubble and hillsides dotted with clumps of bushes. Behind the firing line the artillerymen were making gun positions in two places. The clang of iron against stone sounded everywhere. From the groves came the ring of axes. From the trenches and slits, as if from ventilators, drifted the cool scent of deep-turned earth.

"What a lot of us there are!" Andrei thought. "Surely we won't retreat again?" This time his desire not to retreat any farther was especially strong, and his hopes that the regiment would finally stop the Germans soared higher than ever before.

He was the first of the company to dig himself in up to his chest. He finished off his fox-hole painstakingly. In front of it he threw up a steep parapet which he camouflaged with birch branches, and on the bottom he spread dry grass. When again he dropped his spade to turn and look to the west for a moment, the sky was crimson with the sunset and stained by the smoke of huge fires.

"Ready there?" Yurgin called to him from the side.

"Ready!"

Five years in the army had given Matvei Yurgin a clear understanding of what a soldier should be. He had long since adjusted himself to the idea that if he had to serve, then he must serve well. Always and in every way he strove to be an example to his men, showing them how to bear the rigours of army life. He never had to force himself to do this; it came to him naturally. Ordinarily Matvei Yurgin was unhurried, morose and severe. He never held himself aloof, though. He was one of those commanders who are not very popular among the men in time of peace but are dearly loved in battle.

From the very first the morose, unbending sergeant had felt himself drawn to Andrei. He himself probably could not have explained why, but he always kept a friendly eye on the lad. Andrei had not served in the

army before and did not know much about warfare, but watching him Yurgin saw better than the others that with time this thoughtful, good-natured fellow might show the punch of a real soldier. Perhaps this was what most drew him to Andrei.

Yurgin wiped his spade on the grass and went over to Andrei.

"You beat me this time."

The Sergeant glanced quickly at the trench. "Oh, you've made a good job of it."

From the other side a thick-set man approached them unheard. Semyon Degtyarev was from the reserve and had seen plenty of the army in his time; on the whole, it had moulded him well, giving him stamina and an unfailing cheerfulness. He, too, examined Andrei's fox-hole, then winked his left eye and stuck his short snub-nose into the air.

"Made yourself comfortable, eh? Not thinking of spending the winter here, by any chance?"

"Well, why not?" replied Andrei.

"Huh!" Degtyarev displayed his prominent teeth. "Hark at him! We'll just spend the night here and be on our way in the morning. How many times has it happened? Forgotten?"

"And suppose we don't go any farther?"

"What do you mean not go? What would you do?"

"What would I do?" Andrei's high clear forehead suddenly glistened with sweat. "And what if I dig into the earth here and become part of it?" he said in the same quiet, thoughtful voice. "And don't go any farther. Then what?"

Degtyarev stared at Andrei.

"What a man!" he said, and shook his head.

"Just the kind of man we need," Yurgin retorted as he climbed out of Andrei's trench, which he had inspected to see if it was fit to fire from. "It's time we all thought

the same way. We've got to make a stand and hold firm, as we're told. It's all right, Andrei, this is a good place to fire from."

Behind Yurgin rose the startlingly tall and lean figure of Ivan Umrikhin. He had been called up from the reserve only recently and was the oldest man in the platoon. His long head, with its broad, flattened nose, was always tilted at an angle on his lean, sunburned neck, as if he were constantly asking, "Where's the draught coming from?" The coppery stubble on his chin and cheeks grew so rapidly and was so stiff that the entire section took turns shaving him and had already ruined all their razors.

"Make a stand and hold firm!" Umrikhin repeated the section commander's words slowly and thoughtfully in his hoarse voice, and when the others turned to him, he again said, "Make a stand and hold firm! Well, that's yet to be seen. They say you have to meet force with force. What are you going to do if they're stronger? You'll see, tomorrow they'll bring up tanks. . . ."

Yurgin interrupted him angrily. "What if they do? Trying to scare us again, are you? Well, cut it out, long-shanks. It's a bad habit."

"How can I scare anybody, Comrade Sergeant?" Umrikhin asked in a mournful, placatory voice. I'm scared myself!"

"What the devil about?"

"It's the same thing again—my height," Umrikhin explained slowly. "I'm the most conspicuous man in the regiment. I bend over to the ground when I'm running and still my back sticks up above the bushes. You can see me from such a long way off, Comrade Sergeant!"

"Yes, your old man hadn't got much foresight!" Degtyarev put in. "Look how much material he wasted on you! Quite enough there for two soldiers!"

"Exactly!" Umrikhin agreed readily. "And it would have been better all round."

"It would have been a good thing if each one had got less foolishness," Yurgin said. "You drew too much of it for one man."

Umrikhin sighed, noisily blew his huge nose, and then replied gloomily, but without rancour. "No, you don't understand the position I'm in!" He lifted his finger high. "What about my name? Umri-khin.* Try going to war with a name like that. Even living at home with it was bad enough at times. No, my good friends, I'm marked for death!"

Degtyarev laughed. "Of course you are! In about a hundred years' time!"

"It's all very well for you to laugh, Semyon! If it gets tough for you in battle you can dive down the first mouse-hole, and you're gone!"

"It won't get tough for me," Degtyarev answered sharply. "If a regular battle starts I won't go crawling down holes. I don't belong to your family."

"What's that about my family?. . ."

"All right, men, that will do!" snapped Yurgin. "Don't go flying at each other's throats."

Andrei, who had been silent all this time, could not resist putting a word in; he disliked quarrels.

"Now then, chaps," he said. "That's a fine way to carry on! Let's eat up what I have left here instead. Come on, who's going to help?"

They all sat down beside the trench. Andrei opened his knapsack and began to share out the good things he had brought from home—slices of roast beef, and pies stuffed with chopped carrot and berries. "I wonder how things are at home," he sighed to himself, as he had sighed so many times that day. "Perhaps the Germans are there already." Three other men of the section, Martyanov, Volnykh and Glukhan, came up. It was a long time

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* The Russian word *umri* means die.—*Tr.*

since any of them had tasted home cooking and for the second time that day they helped themselves generously to Andrei's supply.

The sun was already low over the distant woods. All along the line, work was still going on. On the hill to the right, not far off, a machine-gun began to chatter angrily, testing the range.

"Now we've stopped again," Umrikhin remarked gloomily.

"We've gone back a long way for one week!"

"And we just keep on retreating and retreating!"

"No other way out," Umrikhin said. "They're too strong!"

"Why are they any stronger?" Andrei joined in the conversation. "We've got more people. And as for machines. . . ."

"A machine's got no cunning, but the Germans have!"

"They're the cunningest nation in the world."

"Look how they go rolling along!"

"And what a chunk they've grabbed already!" Degtyarev angrily flung down the bone he had been picking.

"The bigger the chunk the quicker they'll choke!" Matvei Yurgin remarked in a gloomy but rather sharp tone as he broke off a piece of berry pie.

"Now that Hitler," Umrikhin began, with the air of one who had lived longer than the rest, as he tossed crumbs into his mouth. "He must be aiming straight for Moscow—"

"Aiming at Moscow?" Martyanov, young and fair-headed, interrupted. "They haven't got the brains to get as far as Moscow!"

"They won't take Moscow. They had better not think they can!"

"Let them think what they like. They won't be able to anyway!"

"Never!" Degtyarev declared heatedly. "Lots of things can happen, but they won't see Moscow any more than they can see their own ears. Moscow wasn't made for the Germans! The whole country will rise up—Moscow won't surrender. That will never happen!"

"Moscow," Andrei said thoughtfully, choosing a moment when the men had grown quieter. "They say it's a beautiful city! Why it would be like giving up your own soul to give her up. That's the way I see it."

And again all the men began to talk at once. All but Yurgin, who munched his berry pie silently and listened, glancing from one to another. And when they began, as soldiers so frequently did at that time, to discuss what they thought should be done to save Moscow and rout the German hordes advancing on it, he remarked:

"Now you're beginning to talk nonsense. If we get down to it, it's our own fault." He juggled a small grey flint in the palm of his hand. "There's some who might wonder what it's good for. Just a stone, they would think. But now take a look!"

Yurgin pulled a broken file out of his pocket to use as a striker, and then struck the flint. A shower of big sparks flew up. With a glance at the men Yurgin struck the flint again and again.

"See?"

"What's the point?" Glukhan asked.

"Each one of us," Yurgin said, "ought to be like this flint. Each one ought to have as much fire and strength and resistance. And more anger! Anger black as pitch. So that it clouds your whole heart! And then the war would soon turn round in the other direction!" He motioned towards the west. "And burn all those Germans to a cinder, curse their souls! I'd stake my life on it!"

He moved Andrei's knapsack aside, indicating that it was time to finish eating.

"All this guessing's no good," he remarked abruptly,

once again glancing at the silent men. "What's the use of trying to guess?"

He pulled out a battered tin box that had once held tooth powder and in which he now kept his tobacco. The others also began to reach for their pouches; the snack had made everyone want to smoke. Makhorka had been issued at dinner-time, but none of them had any paper. Knowing this, Umrikhin sidled up to the Sergeant.

"You haven't a bit of paper on you, have you, Comrade Sergeant? You must have a bit somewhere," he asked.

"Wait, I'll have to look...."

At that moment a shout reached them, "Air raid!"

Immediately everybody looked up and heard the distant drone of engines. Then German bombers were silhouetted against the sky as they emerged from a smoky grey cloud bank. They headed straight for the positions of the regiment. The familiar warnings echoed all along the line.

"Air raid!"

"Take cover!"

"Air raid!"

Yurgin sprang to his feet. "Into the trenches!" he said quietly.

The leading Junkers broke away from the rest before it reached the line where Voloshin's regiment had dug in. In all the trenches helmets ducked out of sight. But the Junkers reached the line without losing height. Only after flying a short distance over the forest behind did it go into a dive. The wild scream of its siren filled the air. The German pilot must have known his target well, for he wasted no time examining it from above. And by the time the other aircraft had spread out in bombing formation he had already dropped his murderous load. Far beyond the forest there was a heavy crash, and then another and another, and a hollow autumnal echo rolled over the countryside....

* XIV *

The men of Yurgin's section watched the planes until they disappeared in the bank of clouds, and then, swearing fiercely, they drifted back to Andrei's fox-hole.

"They were bombing the bridge," Andrei told them. "Across the Vazuza."

"Is it far to this Vazuza?" Yurgin asked.

"Must be about four miles."

"Deep?"

"Some places you can ford and others you have to swim," Andrei replied. "Now that it's autumn it's deep and fast. The infantry could manage it, but the lorries and guns would have a bad time."

The soldiers settled themselves beside the fox-hole. Now they all wanted to smoke more than ever. Again Ivan Umrikhin sidled up to Yurgin.

"How about it, Comrade Sergeant? You haven't a bit of paper to spare, have you?" he asked dolefully. "Would you believe it, not one of us has a scrap! We peeled off the bark on all the birch-trees we passed today!"

"Wait, I'll take a look."

Yurgin drew a small, badly-frayed army newspaper out of his pocket and began to unfold it in his lap. The men all crowded around him, reaching for their pouches. But Yurgin shook his head. "No, I'm right out of paper too," he said.

"What about that?" someone asked over his shoulder.

Just then they all saw the familiar portrait of Comrade Stalin. Semyon Degtyarev was the first to move away from Yurgin.

"We can't use that," he said sternly. "Save it."

"No, we can't!" Umrikhin agreed with a sigh.

"Suppose we smoke a pipe," Matvei Yurgin suggested. "An old man gave me a pipe in a village we passed

through yesterday. A fine old man, he was. He probably carved it himself out of a birch root. It'll do for the whole section. Shall I get it out?"

The pipe was lighted and it travelled from hand to hand. The makhorka in it crackled, and the bitter smoke rasped the men's throats. Restraining a cough with difficulty, Matvei Yurgin resumed the conversation.

"There's no need to guess," he said, tapping the newspaper in his lap. "Here it is, all put clearly. Or have you forgotten?"

"No, of course we haven't," Umrikhin answered for all of them, trying to keep the pipe in his possession as long as possible without being noticed. "And it wouldn't do us any harm to hear it again, of course. Read it, Comrade Sergeant, while we smoke."

Yurgin picked up the newspaper.

" 'What is required,' " he began from a place that he had marked in pencil, " 'to put an end to the danger which hangs over our country, and what measures must be taken to crush the enemy?' "

He lowered the paper and paused, as though to give the men time to ponder on what they had heard, and then continued unhurriedly, breaking up the sentences into phrases, and sometimes pausing over a word.

" 'Above all, it is essential that our people, the Soviet people, should appreciate the full immensity of the danger that threatens our country and cast off complacency, carelessness and the mentality of peaceful constructive work. . . .' "

"Not much chance of doing any constructive work!" Martyanov interrupted.

"Don't interrupt," Umrikhin said sternly, waving the pipe at him.

Matvei Yurgin completed the sentence, paused again, and then continued in a harsher voice.

"'The enemy is cruel and implacable. He is out to seize our lands which have been watered by the sweat of our brow, to seize our grain and oil which have been obtained by the labour of our hands. He is out to restore the rule of the landlords, to restore tsarism. . . .'" Yurgin's voice grew stronger and stronger; it became filled with menacing, wrathful power. "'Thus, the issue is one of life and death for the Soviet State, of life and death for the peoples of the U.S.S.R., of whether the peoples of the Soviet Union shall be free or fall into slavery. . . .'"

Matvei Yurgin stopped. Suddenly his face seemed more lined than usual. Drawing a breath, he parted his wind-chapped lips and angrily drew them back at the corners.

"Understand?" he asked brusquely. Without waiting for an answer he glanced at Andrei and then said, "And for that we don't feed them on noodles, the swine!"

Andrei's face and ears flamed red. He did not answer immediately, and when he did it was with great difficulty.

"Surely, the noodles didn't make all that difference, Comrade Sergeant?"

The others maintained a gloomy silence.

"'Further, there must be no room in our ranks for whimperers and cowards, and deserters. . . .'"

"You have left out something," Degtyarev put in. "Yes, you're right, I left out one word," said Yurgin, smoothing the newspaper. "This place is almost rubbed through." He began the sentence again, "'Further, there must be no room in our ranks for whimperers and cowards, for panic-mongers and deserters; our people must know no fear in the fight and must selflessly join in our Patriotic War of liberation against the fascist enslavers.'"

Yurgin began to fold up the paper. "See how clearly it's all put here?"

The men all began to talk at once; Matvei Yurgin, glancing towards the west, slowly rose from his place.

"That's right, chaps," Umrikhin said. "We'll come back to it later. Now it's time for a rest. Look at the distance we marched today, and then all this digging! My hands and feet do ache, they don't feel like my own at all. It's time we took a rest."

"You'll have a chance to rest a little later," Yurgin said.

"When will that be?"

"After the war."

Umrikhin gave a long whistle. "Oh, hell! But what about now?"

Yurgin's eyes flashed.

"Get up!" he shouted.

* XV *

The sun sank behind the distant forests in the west, flooding them with smoky purple rays. Dusk crept up on all sides. The earth stopped trembling. The sky also grew quiet. Some two hundred yards behind the trenches Yurgin's section spread out fanwise and began to dig trenches again.

"There's a tough devil for you," Umrikhin grumbled.

"Stop moaning," said Degtyarev, who was digging next to him. "I've had enough. My eardrums can't stand it any longer! Why are you so down on him? Better to get a down on those Germans!"

"He never leaves us in peace."

"Huh, the man wants peace! In the middle of a war!"

A small group came into sight from behind.

"Officers," Andrei warned the men.

The leading officer in the group was the tall, heavily-built Captain Ozerov, dressed as usual, in a soldier's khaki padded jacket that was comfortable to march, work and fight in. A little behind him was Battalion Commander Loznevoi; his cape-tent, worn over his great-

coat, billowed out and dragged along the grass like a priest's robe. A little further behind were the orderlies.

Recognizing Yurgin, Ozerov asked, "These are mock trenches, are they?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain."

"Excellent!" Ozerov turned to Loznevoi. "Go ahead! Dig as many as you can. Tell the artillery to build mock positions too. And let them camouflage the main ones so that they can't be seen until you're right on top of them! The entire firing system must be camouflaged before the fighting begins. A sudden blow is the most effective. We should know that by now!"

Loznevoi saluted. "Yes, Comrade Captain."

Ozerov glanced at the men, who had silently formed a group about him, and asked unexpectedly, "You're not afraid to throw grenades, are you?"

The men hesitated.

"Shouldn't be. . . ."

"We threw some during training, but not many. . . ."

Ozerov turned to Umrikhin. "You—do you know how?"

"I was shown once," Umrikhin began evasively.

"Well, you show us now."

Nervously Umrikhin unfastened a grenade from his belt. From the way he handled the detonator it was clear that he was not accustomed to dealing with grenades. The men expected Ozerov to give him a dressing-down that would make the rest of them sick. But Ozerov merely sighed, took the grenade from Umrikhin's hand and demonstrated how to prime it for the throw.

"That clear now?" he asked the men. Then he stepped forward. "And this is how you throw it!"

They all thought Ozerov was only going to make the gesture of throwing, but instead he drew back his arm and suddenly let the grenade fly.

"Down!" he shouted while it was still in the air.

Everybody dropped to the ground. There was an explosion, and a black bush of earth and smoke sprang up some distance ahead. Splinters sang by softly overhead.

Ozerov was the first one up.

"Nobody hurt?"

Talking excitedly, the men picked themselves up.

"That's bad!" Ozerov exclaimed. "I see some of you are still afraid of fire. That's very bad! Don't be afraid!" he shouted. "The man who's afraid always gets killed."

"It was all so unexpected," Loznevoi said as he disentangled himself from his cape-tent.

"Everything is unexpected in battle."

Ozerov turned to the men, "Do you all know the orders?" And when the men replied, he went on, "That's right, comrades. There is only one order: Stand firm until told to move back. If tanks come—stand firm! If infantry comes—stand firm! Make the Germans pay to the last drop of their black blood for every inch of our land. Not a step back!"

Ozerov left, and Yurgin's section got down to work again. The spades rang often, for they were digging in stony earth. After a while Umrikhin glanced round, and then said to Degtyarev in a low, hoarse voice, "See what happened?"

"About the grenade? I saw how little you knew about it."

"Then you didn't see much," Umrikhin noted good-naturedly and sighed. "It was my grenade and it almost killed me! A piece of shrapnel parted my hair! No, I can see I'm not going to live long with a name like mine. Well, when I die I'll take a grenade along with me. I know how to throw them now. In the next world I'll find the man who thought up the name for our family and I'll let him have that grenade so that he'll never be able to collect his guts again. That's all I'll have to say to him!"

Twilight rapidly descended over the earth.

* XVI *

The regiment spent the whole evening reinforcing its positions along the defence line. More than two thousand men, armed with machine-guns, rifles, and grenades, were entrenching themselves in a winding line that stretched for several miles. To cover the line, especially where it cut the main roads along which the German columns were advancing, the artillerymen had mounted all the regiment guns and some of the guns of the anti-tank battalion attached to the regiment.

The defences were prepared under the immediate direction of Captain Ozerov. He moved rapidly up and down the line, sometimes on horseback, sometimes on foot, only rarely sitting down for a smoke. He personally inspected how all the company defensive localities and their main strong-points had been chosen, how the main and auxiliary positions were entrenched, and where the guns for direct fire were placed. Captain Ozerov knew very well that the advancing Germans would bring to bear on them a vastly superior fire-power, and he devoted special attention to the distribution, camouflaging and co-ordination of the regiment's system of fire. He issued strict instructions to his officers to have the main firing points carefully hidden from the enemy before the fighting began; these were to be brought into action only at the decisive moments, and as unexpectedly as possible. The Captain planned a number of highly unpleasant surprises for the Germans in the coming battle. These surprises were to compensate in considerable measure for the regiment's deficiency in fire-power and hence, at least to a certain extent, equalize the two opposing forces.

By nightfall all the main work was completed. Not without fuss and mistakes, the regiment, each company

of it, and each fighting man in each company, had at last taken up its positions on the line.

When Captain Ozerov ran into Yakhno, the Regiment Commissar, in Number Three Battalion, he was delighted. It was the first time he had seen Yakhno that day; in general, it was only by accident that one ever met the Commissar. The thin, lightly-built Yakhno was a great walker; from sunrise to sunset he roamed among the various units, always finding work for himself to do.

Like Ozerov, that evening Commissar Yakhno had been on the defence line all the time. He had kept his political instructors busy. They had made use of the rest-breaks to hold short meetings of Party members and talk with the men in all the companies. They had explained just one thing to the men: until the order came to retreat they must hold the Germans at that line by every means possible.

Commissar Yakhno was also glad to see Captain Ozerov. He at once drew him aside. "Come on, Captain, let's take a walk," he said.

The dusk was thickening. Captain Ozerov could barely make out the expression on Yakhno's face, but he sensed that the Commissar was in a cheerful mood, even elated. Stopping in a little hollow about a hundred yards from the command post of Number Three Battalion, Yakhno turned and faced Ozerov, a short, slight figure in an unbuttoned greatcoat, and with an indefinite wave of his hand began to speak in his usual rapid manner.

"A show-down, eh? A real show-down?"

"I think there'll be a real battle here," Ozerov replied. "We haven't got an easy job."

"But the victory will be ours!" Yakhno declared sharply, as if Ozerov were trying to prove the opposite to him. "Ours!" He bent down and picked a pale autumn flower. "I smell victory at a distance, as I do the scent of this flower!"

Even in the dusk Ozerov saw the smile that lit up the intelligent, still youthful face of the Commissar. He took the flower and raised it to his nose.

"Unfortunately, not everyone smells it, particularly at a distance," he replied soberly.

Yakhno caught Ozerov by the button of his padded jacket. "Not everyone? Have you noticed that?"

"Yes, I have."

"Let's go over there!" Yakhno suddenly suggested, and kicking back the folds of his coat he strode out of the hollow to a small hillock on which a single wild rose-bush grew. "It's more comfortable in a padded jacket, isn't it?" he asked as he waited for the slower moving Ozerov to reach the top. "I'll start wearing one, too. You know, I need something simple and light, something that won't hamper me. . . ." He came up to Ozerov. "Yes, when an army has been retreating for four months not everyone is able to keep his sense of smell keen. To some it seems there's only the smell of blood and corpses now." He gave a shiver of distaste, as if displeased with his own comparison. "But most of the men believe in victory. And I'll tell you something: they believe in it even more persistently today than they did on the first day of the war. I feel that strongly. Just think of the distance they covered today and the amount of earth they threw up, and yet they're all ready to fight this very minute, if need be. All of them, or almost all of them, are sure of success. And the most important thing in war is the mood in which a soldier goes into battle. You'll see: tomorrow all our men, and the Communists especially, will fight like lions. And victory will be ours! The German columns must be halted, and the regiment will do it!"

As he listened to Yakhno, Ozerov realized for the first time why the men loved him: the wonderful faith that he spread generously among them was so full of youthful enthusiasm and unclouded poetic feeling—it

was a faith that influenced people like the first day of spring.

"Of course they'll fight," he agreed. "But morale isn't the only factor in battle."

"I'm not a very experienced soldier," Yakhno replied. "But I know what an officer should be like. He ought to think all the time, particularly before a battle!" He again plucked the button on Ozerov's jacket. "Think! We must do everything to destroy the advantage the enemy has over us in armament! Remember," he went on more quietly, "the great trust that has been placed in us. . . ."

"I'll think it over," Ozerov promised.

Night fell. Far away on the flanks the sky grew purple and signal flares quivered there like birds, but in front of the line everything was swallowed up in a profound darkness. The sound of talking and the rattle of mess-tins came from the firing line as the men began their delayed supper.

When they parted, Yakhno silently gripped Ozerov's hand in the dark. In his clenched fist the Captain still held the flower he had picked.

"You can smell the scent, can't you?" Yakhno asked softly.

"I can," Ozerov answered in a whisper.

"Well, good luck, old man!"

* XVII *

Major Voloshin spent all his time at the command post. The position for the command post had been chosen behind Loznevoi's battalion, on the edge of the big forest which rose in a richly-coloured curtain against the eastern sky. Here sappers spent the entire night digging slit-trenches and building dug-outs.

In the evening Major Voloshin had still hoped that all the units which had reached the crossing would suc-

ceed in gaining the other side of the river that night. In that case his regiment would be able to leave the defence line—by dawn at any rate—without giving battle, and would also manage to put the Vazuza between itself and the enemy. But an hour after the air raid a messenger arrived from General Borodin, the Division Commander, with bad news: the Germans had smashed the bridge across the Vazuza. According to the messenger, General Borodin was doing everything possible to repair the bridge that night. Major Voloshin then realized that a battle was inevitable: traffic across the Vazuza would not be resumed before morning, and in the morning the Germans would undoubtedly reach his positions.

At dawn Major Voloshin summoned Ozerov, who had spent the whole night with the battalions, and ordered him to set out for the Vazuza.

"Find out how things are going there," he said. "They are repairing the bridge, but no one knows when it will be ready for traffic. The Division Commander has taken charge of all the work there himself. According to his orders, our rear units should be crossing over with the division. Check up yourself whether all our rear units are assembled there yet, and find out exactly when the division is due to start crossing over. And come back as quickly as you can."

"Yes, Comrade Major!"

"You may go."

In a few minutes Captain Ozerov was galloping towards the Vazuza.

From the forest in which the regiment command post was located the road led up into an open field from which the spring crops had been harvested. Had it been peace-time this field would have been black from recent ploughing; now not a single furrow was to be seen. In places there were even flattened stacks of oats and buckwheat the collective farmers had failed to take in.

From the field the road dipped steeply to the dark forest along the Vazuza, with little rises on the way; almost the whole length of it was visible from the highest point of the field.

Here Ozerov dropped the reins and looked ahead. It was strange, but it seemed to him that he had never seen such a great and wonderful expanse of country as now spread before him from the top of that bare elevation. Through the broad lowland, shouldering its way between steep banks, flowed the beautiful Vazuza, rosy in the dawn, with a slight mist rising from it. Up-stream, to the south, dense forests with patches of burnished copper and autumnal brocade stretched away to the horizon. Down-stream, to the north, wide, rolling country dotted with small clusters of houses, and with lonely oak-trees standing thoughtfully on the hillocks, also reached to the horizon. Straight ahead across the Vazuza, in the direction of Moscow, the eastern sky was golden in the sunrise. Ozerov had seen the sunrise many times that summer, but he felt he had never yet seen such a calm yet majestic dawn as was now breaking over this enormous world of forest, field and hamlet.

The magnificent view of his vast country at dawn brought Ozerov sudden reassurance. "No, nobody will ever be able to conquer such a land," he thought to himself triumphantly. "We will go through everything, endure everything!"

The entire forest along the Vazuza had been hacked and torn by the bombardment until it looked as though a hurricane of unbelievable violence had swept through it. Trees stood with broken tops and seared branches. Many lay uprooted, like giants felled on the field of battle. Two mighty elms, just like medical orderlies, were bearing a badly-wounded young oak to the edge of the forest. The few houses near the forest had been torn to pieces by bombs; even the huge Russian stoves

had crashed in, scattering brick dust over the hedges. Near by, on the very top of a crippled birch, deposited there by some miracle, hung a sheet of dented, rusty roofing. Throughout the forest and around it gaped bomb craters; all about were scattered the skeletons of burnt-out trucks, the swollen bodies of dead horses, and the axles and wheels of carts.

One would have expected every living being to flee this scene of desolation without a backward glance. Yet the entire ravaged forest, all the little gullies near it, and the bank of the Vazuza teemed with people. All about stood guns, lorries, carts, field kitchens and ambulance vans. Camp-fires were smoking everywhere, and the air was filled with the clamour of human voices, whistles, motor horns, neighing, mooing, the ring of axes, the creaking of carts, and the wailing of children. The whole camp surged in complicated and incomprehensible movement; yet one could feel that all the movement was directed to a single end, guided by a single thought, which held complete sway over everybody there. The closer one came to the Vazuza the greater was the noise and movement. The whole thundering mass of people, lorries and carts was streaming ceaselessly towards the crossing, as though there existed no other way out of the forest.

Captain Ozerov gave a deep sigh of relief: he realized that the bridge had been restored. When he came closer to the river, however, he almost thought a battle was going on at the crossing. A stream of lorries, guns and carts was rattling over the narrow bridge to the eastern bank of the Vazuza, and only there, as if sensing freedom, did it divide into small rivulets. Above the bridge the infantry was crossing on the ferry, on rafts, in rowing-boats and by swimming. The refugees were making their way across below the bridge on whatever came to hand; together with them horses and cows were

struggling desperately against the current, snorting and puffing, their heads held high. Thousands of people were hurrying to get across the Vazuza before the sun rose.

The scene alarmed Ozerov. But after he had found General Borodin on the steep bank he realized there was no reason for alarm. Things at the crossing were evidently going better than had been expected.

The General was sitting on a cape-tent spread on the ground beside a small fire, leaning with his back against the broad stump of an elm eaten out by rot. A greatcoat covered his knees, and his top-boots hung on pegs near the fire. The General held his bare grey head with its stiff, pointed moustache erect, but his face was indifferent to the rumble and discordance that came from the river. His eyes, turned towards the sunrise, were tightly shut. General Borodin was sound asleep. A young soldier squatting on his heels before the fire was drying the General's foot cloths, turning them over and over in his hands.

Although he had been sleeping soundly, the General woke immediately he sensed the presence of a newcomer beside the fire. He received Ozerov, as it seemed to the Captain, in an exceedingly calm and affectionate manner.

"Don't bother to report, my dear fellow," he said as he started to wrap the cloths round his feet. "I know why you're here." Accepting a boot from the soldier, he nodded toward the river. "See that? Worked all night and did the job. I expect to have the entire bank cleared by twelve noon. Perhaps even sooner. All the river services of your regiment are here and will leave with the division. The order for your withdrawal will be given by wireless. If conditions during the withdrawal are difficult—" here he knit his brows and reached for the other boot, "very difficult, then I advise you to withdraw.... Just a minute...." He finished putting on his

boot, jumped to his feet like a young man, twisted his moustache and then said, "Let's have the map."

As he unfolded it he glanced up at Ozerov several times, then frowned and twitched his moustache in displeasure. Ozerov guessed at once why the General kept looking at him. "Excuse me, Comrade General," he said in embarrassment, fingering his chin.

"It's a very bad habit to report in such a state," Borodin said sternly. "A very bad habit, Comrade Captain! Remember, next time I shall not stand for it!"

But in spite of the General's reproof, and even to his own surprise, Ozerov felt for the second time that morning, with the kind of radiant joy which suffuses one's entire being, that the turning-point in the war was not far distant, and that no German force could ever break the calm, majestic and immortal spirit of the Russians.

* XVIII *

A clear, crisp morning spread over the earth. When Captain Ozerov returned to the regiment command post he was struck by the stillness there. After their sleepless night many of the men and officers were dozing in their tents and dug-outs. He could distinctly hear the falling leaves rustling against branches as they floated to the ground. There was a strong smell of upturned clay, dead ashes and resin.

Captain Ozerov reported his meeting with General Borodin to the Regiment Commander and then went to his tent. Beside the tent his orderly, Petya Uralets, a soldier with big eyes and a prominent forehead, was rubbing down his sweating horse with a handful of grass.

"What's the news here, Petya?"

"Oh, you should have seen it, Comrade Captain!" Petya Uralets moved closer and began to speak in a

rapid whisper. "A German plane flew over! As ugly as a gate it was, the damned thing, but it couldn't half fly!"

"Well?"

"He began doodling around overhead, and a soldier from the administrative platoon went and took a pot at him! You should have seen what happened then!"

"Did he hit it?"

"No, that's not what I mean!" Petya Uralets nodded in the direction of Voloshin's dug-out and, brandishing his handful of grass, continued, "Then the Major jumps out and roars, 'Who did it? Who fired that shot?' "

Ozerov frowned. "That's enough!" he said. "Who gave you permission to judge your commander's actions? If he forbade it, he did so for a good reason. Do you understand?"

The embarrassed Petya Uralets straightened to attention. "Yes, I understand, Comrade Captain!"

"Give me my razor."

But Captain Ozerov had only had time to shave his right cheek when urgent shouts sounded round the command post.

"Planes! Planes!"

About twenty Junkers were droning across the sky in a large fan. Their wings glittered in the sun. As the leader neared the sector held by Loznevoi's battalion it went into a steep dive, and for miles around the air vibrated with its savage, breath-taking wail.

The earth shuddered so violently that a thick shower of leaves came down in the forest. Clouds of black smoke mushroomed over Loznevoi's sector.

... A few minutes before the bombing began Lieutenant Loznevoi had started out for the command post of Number Three Company with Lieutenant Khmelko and Kostya, his orderly; in the course of the night Loznevoi's spirits had sunk still lower, and all the morning he had been wandering aimlessly about the trenches, but no-

where could he find peace of mind. They were already half way to the post when Loznevoi heard the throb of engines in the sky. Looking up, he at once caught sight of a large formation of Junkers bombers. They were flying along slowly and heavily off to one side, and at first Loznevoi thought they would go on farther, to the Vazuza, perhaps. There was a strict order not to reveal the battalion's positions, however, and glancing back he shouted to his companions, "Down!"

They all dropped to the trampled grass and lay still, watching the aircraft. "They'll be over the forest soon," each of them was thinking, "and then we can go on." But when the planes came to the forest they went into a turn to get the sun behind them as they attacked the battalion's positions.

"Comrade Battalion Commander!" Khmelko shouted. "They're coming this way!"

"They're going to attack!" Kostya cried, flattening himself in the grass.

They were on a bare, open meadow without a single ditch or hole. "Well, this is it!" Loznevoi said to himself. His forehead grew damp. There was only one thought in his mind—to save himself. He leaped to his feet and yelled, "Back! Follow me!"

The three of them, heads down, sprinted across the meadow, their spurs jangling, and came out on a big field covered with thick rye stubble, also trampled by many feet. After another hundred yards Loznevoi felt his chest would burst and realized that he could not gain the command post, where the sappers had built a good dug-out for him during the night. It was too late. At that moment he noticed a shallow, hastily-dug fox-hole. With a wave to his companions he dived into it, and at once started coughing violently. Khmelko and Kostya saw him wave and scattered in search of shelter.

When his coughing fit had subsided Loznevoi peered out of his fox-hole. To the left, about thirty yards away, he saw the dull glint of a helmet above the stubble. "Khmelko. But where's Kostya?" He glanced to the right and a short distance away saw one of the numerous dummy anti-tank gun emplacements the artillerymen had prepared during the night at Ozerov's orders. The thin end of a small log pointed west over the parapet of the rectangular hollow; around the log stood almost leafless birch saplings. Loznevoi realized that he had stumbled into one of the dummy trenches the artillerymen had also dug to deceive the enemy. He clenched his teeth until they began to ache.

From the trenches ahead faint voices floated over: an officer was shouting at his men. Loznevoi looked ahead of him. A little way off, in a lane between rows of cut rye stalks, an ashen-grey field mouse was burrowing in the earth. Her dewdrops of eyes were sparkling merrily. She was gathering ears of rye. Something frightened her, and she whisked out of sight. But a second later Loznevoi saw her bright little eyes again: her hole was near by. "She's got a dug-out!" he reflected. "She won't be caught!" And as he glanced about his dummy fox-hole he felt a cough welling up again in his burning chest.

But it was too late to look for another place. With a savage wail the leading Junkers went into a dive from a high altitude. After plunging several hundred feet it started to pull out, and at that instant Loznevoi saw four bombs detach themselves from its fuselage. They fell like drops of some heavy black liquid. But Loznevoi lost sight of them almost immediately, and a rising, ear-splitting whistle burst into his consciousness. Covering his eyes in terror, he pushed his face into a corner of the fox-hole. With his whole body he felt the ground

under him shake four times in rapid succession. Heavy explosions rolled over the countryside.

The bombs fell to Loznevoi's left. Clouds of smoke were drifting over the defences. Loznevoi straightened his helmet and looked out of the fox-hole. The leading Junkers was roaring by overhead after its pull-out, while the second in the line was just moving into position for attack. There was a brief moment of quiet. Loznevoi could hardly believe his eyes when he suddenly saw the mouse in front of him again. She had popped out of her hole as though nothing had happened and was again gathering ears of rye. She bustled about gaily, and the thought flashed through Loznevoi's mind that this gay mouse would surely live through the battle, would lay up a big supply of grain in her hole, would pass the winter in comfort, would greet the new spring. . . .

A flood of terror swept over Loznevoi.

He did not see the second plane dive; neither did he see how many bombs it dropped. When the blood-chilling wail of the siren sounded again he whimpered like a child and shrunk dazedly into his fox-hole. A second later, feeling that he had been almost lifted into the air, he cried out and dug his fingers into the earth. The bombs were exploding round the dummy emplacement, and little charred pellets of earth showered down on his helmet and back. He could see nothing in the smoke.

Loznevoi was stunned with fear. From that moment on he had only a faint idea of what was happening around him on the field. The Germans must have been dropping the greater part of their load on the dummy gun-emplacements and infantry trenches, for their bombs were exploding behind the real trenches, many of them in the sector where Loznevoi and his companions were hiding. They bombed in a calm, business-like way, making

several runs each and selecting their targets methodically. Crash after crash resounded. Hot blasts swept outwards from the places of the explosions. Sickening black clouds of smoke and dust rose over the field faster than the wind could disperse them.

Loznevoi's head beat against the crumbling edge of the fox-hole as he coughed. He coughed a long time, spitting out earth. Slowly, like the sunrise spreading through a fog, his senses began to return to him; he stopped coughing and, clawing at the earth, dragged himself out of the fox-hole. He turned a wild, lack-lustre gaze about him. His ears rang as though crickets were chanting inside them, and the ringing made his temples throb and ache. Ulcer-like bomb craters, fresh and jagged, gaped on the surface of the field. Before his eyes a curtain of smoke swirled in the wind. A little way from the fox-hole, where the mouse had been, he saw a tan leather boot with a spur glinting on its heel.

"That's mine!" he muttered.

Loznevoi could not mistake his spurs. But how did the boot come to be outside the fox-hole? What was it doing there? After some hesitation he twisted round and looked down at his feet. No, his boots were on! And only then did he remember that at the halt the evening before he had exchanged spurs with Lieutenant Khmelko. "But where is he?" Loznevoi cast his eye over the stubble in search of Khmelko's helmet, but an uneven heap of earth now lay in the place where he had seen it before the bombing. "Why did he throw away his boot?" Loznevoi crawled forward and reached for it, and at the same instant he recoiled; out of the torn boot top jutted a white bone. He lay down, pressed his cheek to the earth, wiped his lips and, to convince himself more firmly that he understood, he said out loud, "Bombed. . . ."

A heaviness pervaded his body. But calm, sober consciousness quickly returned. Never had he wanted so

much to live as in those few seconds! And suddenly a simple and lucid idea flashed through his mind, an idea that held salvation, that granted him life. Before he had time to rejoice at his idea he heard the tramp of feet and Kostya's voice crying, "There he is, there he is!"

Kostya ran up to Loznevoi, kneeled down beside him and gripped his shoulder. Feigning panic, the Lieutenant began to push frantically at the ground to get up. The look he gave his orderly was dull and uncomprehending. Kostya's mud-spattered face was twisted with pain and had grown suddenly older. Blood was trickling from his left nostril.

"It's me, me! Comrade Battalion Commander, are you wounded?" he shouted in a sobbing voice.

Loznevoi waited a second, then shouted in reply, "Eh?"

"Had a knock? Where? Where does it hurt?"

Loznevoi nodded toward the west. "There—yes, they've gone!"

Suddenly Captain Ozerov's tall, bulky figure rose above him. The Captain was breathing hard. His tunic collar was open, and his reddish hair was dishevelled. In his left hand he held a helmet by the chin strap; with his right he was hurriedly adjusting his holster which had slipped round on to his stomach.

"Looks as if he's shell-shocked," Kostya said to the Captain without standing up, his finger pressed to his bleeding nostril.

Captain Ozerov quickly knelt down.

"Feel bad? Where does it hurt?"

"No, he's gone stone deaf," Kostya said.

"Damn it, that's rotten!" Ozerov said with disappointment, to no one in particular. Then he jumped to his feet. "Well, take him to the rear. Move! And stop snivelling! Where's the Battalion Commissar? Don't you know?"

"In one of the companies somewhere...."

"Take the Battalion Commander back past his CP, understand? Run inside and tell them to call up the Commissar—let him take over. Understand? Mind you don't forget. And then escort the Battalion Commander to the rear. Well, that's all!"

The Captain turned round, then shouted, "Hey, Petya! Follow me!"

* XIX *

At the crucial moment, just as the battle was beginning Number Three Battalion, the keystone of the defence, had been left without a commanding officer. There was no time to mope about it, however. Captain Ozerov realized that every minute was precious. With only this thought in his mind, he ran as fast as he could to the forward edge of the defences, holding his helmet to his chest as he ran.

Stopping to recover his breath on a low hill covered with a clump of young birches, Captain Ozerov at once saw, through the shimmering smoky haze, that soldiers from the sector held by Three Company were in disorderly flight over the field; they were running crouched over, and they dropped frequently to the ground. His first thought was that they had been put to flight by the bombing. But they were all running in his direction, and he realized that it was something else that had made them give up the line.

Petya Uralets, who had been following close on the heels of his commander, dashed up the hill and stopped, gasping for breath. Without saying a word Ozerov seized his orderly's sub-machine gun, raised it over his head and, his face contorted as though by excruciating pain, shouted at the top of his voice, "Halt! Halt!"

Bent over double, almost on all fours, one of the

soldiers was running straight towards Ozerov without seeing or hearing him. On the slope he fell from exhaustion. He crawled a few paces, working frantically with his arms and legs, then jumped up and still unaware of Ozerov's presence dashed straight at him.

Ozerov fired into the air.

"Halt!"

The soldier stopped, threw out his arms and stared wildly at Ozerov. His face was smeared with clay, the front of his tunic was torn, there was a trickle of blood on his forehead, and his terror-filled eyes bulged unseeingly. When the men running far behind and on the sides heard the burst of fire and saw the leading man stop, they slowed down. Ozerov was trembling all over.

"Where are you going, you rat? Running away?" he shouted hoarsely as he stepped forward.

"Tanks!" The soldier yelled, waving his arms. His wild eyes bulged white. "Tanks over there!"

Ozerov advanced on him. "Back!"

"Ah-h-h!" the soldier moaned, stepping back. "Forcing me?"

Ozerov raised the sub-machine gun and fired a long second burst over the soldier's head. The man crumpled to the ground but jumped up at once and started to run back headlong with frightened glances over his shoulder at Ozerov. As though at a command, his comrades who had been running behind also turned about and fled back to the line.

Ozerov started down the slope with big strides.

"Ba-a-ack!" he shouted.

Only then, as he walked rapidly after the men, did Ozerov look up into the distance. One after the other dark-grey German tanks were emerging from a fir wood that walled off the horizon and, bouncing on ruts and hummocks, were spreading out into formation. They

were still far away and the roar of their engines came over faintly, like the calm roll of distant thunder.

The soldiers ran to their trenches and Ozerov strode quickly after them. Now and then he raised the sub-machine gun over his head and shouted, "Forward! Use your grenades! Burn them out!"

* XX *

As soon as the planes turned and made off, Matvei Yurgin darted over to the next trench, where he could see the top of Andrei's dull-green helmet.

"Is it over? Have they gone?" asked Andrei.

"All over!" Yurgin sat down on the edge of the trench. "Well, how do you feel?"

"All right. I just sat through it." A smile lit up Andrei's soft, thoughtful face for a second. "Phew, how they scream! It gets you right in the guts! Come on, climb down here."

Andrei spoke rather more quickly than usual. He had not been frightened by the bombing; it had only excited him. It was his first bombing. As yet not once during the retreat had he seriously considered the possibility of being killed. Nor had he thought about death at the sight of those planes. He still did not know what a frightful thing bombing was. For that reason—and for that reason alone—he had not been in the least afraid. He had watched the planes go into their dive and the bombs start falling. Deafened by their metallic shriek, he had shrunk quickly into the corner of the trench. Then, looking out, he had marvelled, "All that smoke! Like a volcano!" It was Andrei's luck that all the bombs had fallen far behind him, on the dummy positions; he had not seen their fiendish destructive force with his own eyes and hence he had experienced no fear whatever, merely excitement.

Yurgin was glad of this.

Andrei and Yurgin settled themselves on the bottom of the trench facing each other and talked excitedly about the bombing. They did not notice either the tanks appear on the fringe of the distant wood or some of the men from Three Company run away from the line. Only when a sub-machine gun burst sounded on the left and bullets chased each other through the dry autumn air, did they glance uneasily out of the trench. Men from Three Company were scurrying over the field back to the line of trenches.

"What are they up to?" Yurgin exclaimed in surprise.

Andrei pulled at his sleeve. "Look over here!"

At the sound of engines Matvei Yurgin squinted into the distance.

"Tanks!" he said in a rapid whisper. "Those are tanks!"

"How many?"

"God knows!" Yurgin stood up over the trench. "Well, Andrei, I'm going! You ready? Your grenades tied together? How about your fire bottles?"

"Look, I've got everything. . . ."

"Well—" Yurgin quickly put out his hand and gripped Andrei's shoulder hard. "You all right? Keep your eyes open, Andrei, boy!"

Then he jumped out of the trench and shouted to his section.

"Grenades ready! Bottles! No funking! Let them come close!" With each phrase his voice grew stronger. "Fight to kill! No funking!"

Andrei had not yet encountered tanks and did not know how difficult and terrifying it was to fight them with the weak hand weapons the soldier carried at his belt. Veteran soldiers and officers said that it was quite easy to damage or set the tanks on fire. And so when he saw the tanks, again he was not in the least afraid.

He moved his knapsack to the back wall of the trench so as not to crush his food by accident, and looked out a second time, now more intently. Like huge black buzzing beetles the tanks crawled out of the wood one after the other and, lurching on the uneven ground, slowly spread out over the yellow field. Andrei began to count them, but he got mixed up because they kept appearing on rises and disappearing in hollows as they straightened out into attack formation. "What kind are they?" he wondered. "Medium or light?" Suddenly he decided that he ought to take a drink of water before the battle. While he drank from his water-bottle he did not remove his gaze from the field on which the tanks had appeared. The idea occurred to him that he was threatened by death. But still he did not feel frightened: curiosity quickly got the better of fear and made him forget about death. He even pulled a few twigs out of the parapet so that he could see the tanks better. Then he wanted to smoke, but realized with disappointment that he would not have time. "Afterwards," he decided out loud.

Crouching down in the trench, he began to inspect his bundle of grenades. Just then the tanks raised a whine that was echoed by all the surrounding woods. Andrei straightened up; one tank—the leader—was speeding over a dirt road in a cloud of dust, while the rest, spread out fanwise over a wide area, followed behind, nosing into the hollows and bouncing up on the mounds. The growing roar of the engines and the clang of their treads now rolled over the field like thunder. The earth began to rumble like iron. Fifty yards ahead of Andrei's fox-hole something popped twice in succession with a flash of flame and a puff of smoke, and then something began to strike into the earth around him with a hiss.

"Down, you fool!" he heard Yurgin exclaim. "They're shooting!"

"The tanks?"

"Get down!" Yurgin shouted, peeping out.

No sooner had Andrei pressed his cheek to the cool wall of the trench than the guns opened up from the grove on the left. In a whirl of dust the dark leading tank, with white crosses on its sides, was still speeding straight ahead, cutting across the windings in the road. Flame spurted from the muzzle of its gun at regular intervals. The battalion's excited gun-layers caught it in their sights and fired frequently, but they kept missing. At last a shell glanced off the sloping turret. A split second later another struck the side of the tank and it swerved sharply at full speed. With a clanging noise, the tank spread one of its broad treads out over the grass and, jerking clumsily, turned its rear to the guns. At that moment several more shells must have hit it, for there was a loud crash and a thick column of flame spurted skywards.

Andrei looked up out of the trench again but pellets of earth immediately flicked against his cheek and helmet. "Damn!" he exclaimed, squatting and rubbing his eyes. On the left the guns were barking. All along the line machine-guns were chattering wildly. Every now and then a protracted human cry rose amidst the crash of gun-fire and the roar of engines, which now rolled over the field more and more threateningly. Three tanks were already in flames on the field. The reek of gunpowder, burning oil and charred iron stung Andrei's nostrils. Yet the other tanks came on and on towards the line.

Earth began to crumble off the wall of the trench. Andrei realized that the tanks were quite near. Without looking out, he snatched up a bottle filled with a yellowish liquid. The rubber band round the neck of the bottle held the fuse—a long wooden splinter smeared with an amber-coloured mixture. Then he pulled a box

of matches out of his pocket. He struck the first match three times before he noticed it had no head. "Damn!" he muttered under his breath. "What junk!" When the head of the next match crumbled and the striker wore thin, Andrei began to get nervous. The shaking of the earth grew more intense. A hail of bullets whipped over the trench. . . .

Only with the third match did Andrei manage to light the fuse, but by then he no longer felt as calm as he had during the first few minutes of the battle. Sweat streamed down his cheeks. There was a tank fifty paces from the trench. It was standing still, the muzzle of its gun turned to the right, firing at the edge of the wood, where a battery was pounding away. But suddenly the whole armoured hulk gave a jerk. Its motor snarled and then broke into a high-pitched whine. Andrei was deafened, as in a high wind. The tank jerked still harder, as though it were swallowing something, and lumps of earth flew into the air from under its clanking, spinning treads.

The bottle was now warm in Andrei's hand. He saw that half the fuse was already burnt and hurriedly flung the bottle forward. It described a smoky arc, the glass and liquid sparkling in the sun with the colours of the rainbow, and fell to earth a few paces in front of the tank. "Did it fall short?" Andrei thought with consternation, crouching in the bottom of the trench. The tank passed by the bottle, the fuse of which was smoking faintly, and headed straight for his fox-hole. Andrei felt his head swell up from its roar and clang. He no longer heard anything of what was happening around him. He saw nothing before him but the tank. The closer it approached the bigger it grew. Its cannon and machine-gun barrels spitting fire, the huge tank was now crashing forward against a background of sky and clouds, which to Andrei looked like puffs of white gas. With a mad force the glistening, grinding treads of the tank

were clawing up the entire field, the bushes, Andrei's trench. . . .

Andrei broke into a sweat. With a wild shout he grabbed a bundle of grenades and threw it without aiming under the onrushing tank. Then he immediately dropped to the bottom of the trench. The tank shuddered and was shrouded in smoke for an instant, but it tore ahead with a still louder roar. The left tread crashed over the parapet of Andrei's trench. The tank then turned sharply to the right, sending a shower of earth and twigs into the trench.

The instant it started forward again, however, a bottle flew out of the next trench, sparkling in the sunlight. It broke over the engine compartment. Liquid fire ran down the armour and into the slits.

With a great shout Yurgin leaped out of his trench, bounded forward and hurled a second bottle. The flames on the engine compartment flared up higher. Again Yurgin's battle-cry rang out over the field.

The tank veered sharply to the right and left several times and then turned back, filling the air with its wail as, with the frantic strength of a living creature, it tried to shake off the flames. But the flames had taken a firm hold on the slits. The tank swerved this way and that and sprang into the air with savage growls. It flew ahead at a mad speed, bouncing up on rises and nosing into hollows, but the fire had dug its claws into the body of the tank like a bird of prey, and was gripping it tight, wearing down its strength, strangling it. . . .

* XXI *

Matvei Yurgin was no longer recognizable. All his movements were abrupt and jerky. He breathed in quick gasps, his big white teeth flashing. From under his helmet streams of grimy sweat trickled down his swarthy, flaming cheeks.

His attention focused on the burning tank and its efforts to put out the flames, for a time Matvei Yurgin did not notice what else was happening on the field—in battle a soldier always sees only what is taking place close at hand, kaleidoscopic pictures which his inflamed gaze usually catches by accident. Only when he saw the tank dive into a ditch, stop short and spread out over itself, like a banner of death, a huge red curtain of smoke-edged flame, did he look about him more calmly. He saw shells exploding and heard bullets whistling past, and his first thought was of Andrei.

"Andrei!" he shouted, looking for his comrade's trench.

But then he caught sight of another tank coming over the crest of a rise about a hundred yards ahead and a little to the right. The tank was moving slowly. Riflemen and machine-gunners were firing at its observation slit from the nearby trenches; even in the sunlight quick bullet glints could be seen all over the front of the tank and on its turret. The tank was raking the trenches with its machine-gun fire; it seemed to be sneezing fire and smoke as it worked its way laboriously over the roaring field.

Bending low, Yurgin ran to his trench, where he remembered he had a bundle of grenades. He found them at the bottom of the trench.

The tank was very near. It was moving ahead slowly to the right of the trench; slowly and uncertainly, for molten lead had evidently blocked up the driver's observation slit, and perhaps had wounded him in the eye as well.

Suddenly the figure of a soldier rose in the path of the tank. A thin curtain of smoke concealed him for an instant but then the sun lit him up, and Yurgin saw him walk forward to meet the tank, shouting frenziedly. In his left hand he held a bundle of grenades. His right

arm had been torn off at the elbow; blood was spattering from the tattered sleeve.

Yurgin recognized the soldier. "Martyanov!" He sprang out of the trench, to see Martyanov, hit by a bullet, down on one knee in the grass, yelling and weakly raising the bundle of grenades with his left hand. The tank rolled forward and struck him down—and that same second a wave of blast threw Yurgin to one side, like a heavy blow on the side of the head.

Clutching at the grass, Yurgin jumped up, his features distorted by fresh fury and by horror at what he had just witnessed. He dashed forward. After crushing Martyanov the tank, which was painted dark-grey, with a dragon on its side, turned sharply to the right; considerable damage had probably been inflicted on its rollers and treads. Yurgin ran ahead a few paces towards the tank with the bundle of grenades poised in his hand. Then he straightened up, threw the grenades and dropped exhausted to the dry grass.

The explosion lifted him off the ground. When he raised his head a second later he saw that the tank, its right tread sunk in a trench, had lurched sideways into a bush of sweet-briar, where it lay jerking and wheezing. Its turret and gun barrel were turning about, as though it were sniffing its path—but it could not budge. A new explosion resounded on the other side of the machine. A scorching cloud of smoke enveloped Yurgin. He jumped up and rushed over to the tank.

"This way!" he shouted. "Come on!"

He quickly clambered up on the tank, and, looking back and waving his arms, again shouted, "This way!"

The first to run up was Degtyarev, the soldier who had thrown a grenade at the damaged tank from the other side.

"Earth!" Yurgin shouted to him. "Bung up the exhausts!"

Degtyarev picked up a handful of earth from the parapet the tank had smashed.

"Use your helmet! Your helmet!"

Degtyarev scooped up some earth in his helmet and poured it on the hot cowling of the exhausts, under which the engine was wheezing fitfully. Just then Umrikhin, plastered with clay, ran up to the tank, and other men followed from different sides.

"Settle him!" Yurgin shouted triumphantly.

Shouts rang out on all sides. Flushed with success, they became oblivious of everything else taking place around them and set about finishing off the tank with whatever came to hand. They fired into various openings. They stuffed the exhaust with earth and battered the big-gun and machine-gun barrels and the warm armour-plating with stones.

* XXII *

A crash sounded near by. Captain Ozerov was momentarily blinded. A few seconds later, surprised to find himself lying on the ground, he clutched at a wheel of a gun carriage and started to get up. When he fell, his helmet had fallen off, and his hair was now matted with earth. There were gunpowder burns all over his face; blood trickled down his unshaven left cheek. His eyes roamed over the battlefield, searching for something.

Petya Uralets ran up anxiously. "Wounded?" he asked.

"I won't be wounded! Or killed!" Ozerov's features were distorted with fury, and he shouted as though he were violently drunk. "Me? No!" He dragged himself to his knees. "Over there—what happened over there?"

"Gun number three—"

"Knocked out?"

"You're wounded, wounded!" Petya Uralets shouted. "You must be bandaged—there's blood! Comrade Captain!"

"Am I wounded?"

"In the head! Here!"

"Oh well, Petya, patch me up! But be quick about it!"

Captain Ozerov knelt, holding on to the gun wheel, and submissively let Uralets turn his head from side to side as he dressed the wound. When he had finished, the Captain pushed him away and rose quickly to his feet beside the gun—tall and thick-set, his face black, and a bandage round his head like a turban. He had forgotten about his helmet.

"Shells!" he shouted hoarsely, glancing round.

The battery had only one gun left. The other three, which had stood in a row to the left, were smashed. Wheels, twisted gun carriages and barrels, shattered crates, dead men, smashed rifles and helmets and bloody tatters of uniforms were strewn over the shell-ploughed artillery positions. Two soldiers were clumsily hauling a wounded man to the forest. Another was crawling there by himself, dragging his shattered leg. In a nearby trench Ozerov glimpsed moving helmets.

"Hey, you! Hey!" he shouted, holding on to the gun-shield. "Aren't we Russians? Shells! Get me some shells!"

Petya Uralets ran off for shells. Three soldiers in helmets and dirty uniforms jumped out of the trench and followed him.

And so the lone gun went into action again. The artillerymen who had been lucky enough to escape death were from various crews but they understood one another at a glance, and each carried out the duty that fell to him quickly and efficiently. And Captain Ozerov, now helping to turn the gun, now passing up shells, now scanning the battlefield, again began to call out:

"Fire! Fire!"

The command was unnecessary, and no one heard it. But somehow the repetition of this word, the commonest in war, made Captain Ozerov feel good. He shouted it with relish, his whole body quivering, as though he had just learned the word and liked it so much that he was ready to repeat it over and over again.

"Fire! Fire!"

He was so engrossed in the battle that he could think of nothing else. He was in a state of unconscious but complete self-abnegation. He did not hear the shell blasts or the whistle of the bullets. He had no time to think about danger or about death, which threatened him every instant. He had no time to think about showing his subordinates that he was unafraid of death. Each minute of the battle faced him with a multitude of different duties, and these duties, every one of which demanded immediate execution, absorbed all his attention, all his inner powers.

Eleven tanks were burning on the field; huge trains of smoke drifted from them on a slow current of air. Near the infantry trenches, where many fire bottles had been needlessly broken in the haste and panic, the grass and stubble were burning out. The air over the battlefield was close and heavy.

The first wave of tanks, which had formed the spearhead of the attack, was smashed. But now a second and stronger wave was coming on. The tanks advanced steadily over the smoking field, skirting glowing bonfires of metal, and now the thunder of their engines drowned all other sounds of battle.

In the centre of the line tanks were ironing out the infantry trenches. Shells were exploding everywhere. Earth showered down on the field in pellets, as if it were coming out of a seive, and smoke drifted up from it, like dust from a rubbish heap. Occasionally the faint

cries of wounded men could be heard amid the grinding clanging uproar.

But neither Captain Ozerov nor any of the artillerymen saw the battlefield. For them the whole battle was concentrated in a small area round their solitary gun.

One of the tanks got quite near. Captain Ozerov spotted it as it came over the crest of a rise.

"Fire!" he shouted wildly.

The gun-layer, a small fellow as black as a chimney-sweep, with corporal's insignia on his collar, turned the barrel to the right and quickly sighted over it. The gun recoiled sharply once, then again, then a third time, as though it wanted to jump out of its emplacement and throw itself at the tank. One of the shells knocked out the tank's track idler and the other jammed the turret. Abruptly the tank turned about and crawled into a hollow dotted with hazel bushes and buckthorn, its loosened tread making a grinding noise.

"Fire!" shouted Ozerov, tugging at the gun-layer.

A shell exploded behind them against a fir-tree standing by itself near the edge of the wood. The powder-blackened gun-layer twitched, grabbed convulsively for the breech-block, twitched again and fell back, throwing out his arms. Another soldier dropped the shell he was carrying, cried out at the top of his voice, and staggered away, clutching at his side.

While Ozerov and Uralets were dragging the dead body of the gun-layer over the parapet of the emplacement, the third artilleryman, also a young fellow, but heavily built, discovered while handling the breech-block that a shell splinter had smashed the cover of the firing mechanism and that the hammer spring and the firing pin had flown out. From a distance Ozerov sensed that something had gone wrong with the gun. He rushed over to it and squatted beside the mount.

"Well? What's the matter?"

"See this?" The artilleryman stood up and waved both his hands in a gesture by which he buried the gun and bid farewell to it. "She's finished!"

Ozerov suddenly remembered that somewhere near the gun he had seen an axe left behind from the night before, when the emplacement had been built.

"Petya, that axe!" he shouted, looking around.

Uralets jumped down into the emplacement and handed him the axe.

"And a nail—give me a nail!"

"Here's a file," suggested the artilleryman, guessing the indefatigable captain's intention.

"Load!" Ozerov commanded.

The damaged tank had crawled jerkily past the bushes and was moving farther away into the hollow. Ozerov hastily set the file in the empty breech-recess and struck it with the axe. The gun shuddered. The shell hit the engine compartment of the retreating tank, and the tank burst into flames.

But before Ozerov even had time to rejoice at their success, Petya Uralets grabbed him from behind and, shouting something, began to drag him away from the gun. As he stepped back over the mount the Captain fell, and when he sprang to his feet he saw a tank only twenty paces away, to his left. It had made a wide detour through a small wood in the rear and was charging the emplacement. Ozerov wanted to do something, snatch up something, but it was too late. Roaring and clanging deafeningly the tank was already rearing over the parapet.

What followed took only a few brief seconds. Unable to do anything, Captain Ozerov backed away, tripped, and fell flat. He did not see the tank's left tread crush the gun and the artilleryman....

* XXIII *

Abruptly, with an uneasy feeling, Andrei opened his eyes. On a grey stone close to his head sat an old crow; from her right wing jutted a twisted feather, its underside glistening white. Beak raised, she was squinting at Andrei like an old hag in spectacles, and suddenly her eyes seemed to take on the roundness and deathly lunar colour of an owl's. The crow twitched her lowered wings as if from cold and hopped forward. Andrei froze in horror at the sound of her claws scraping against the stone. He did not move but gave a moan, and the bird, taking flight, blotted out the sky for an instant with whirring wings.

Andrei pulled himself up and looked round with swollen, bloodshot eyes. He was lying in some mangled bushes. Fresh rust-coloured sap was trickling down the stripped alders near by. Round little full-blown berries glistened on the crushed buckthorn. The old crow swayed on the crown of a young birch, and her beak had a metallic glint in the sun. She had no intention of flying away far. Her gaze was alert and expectant. Andrei started clutching at the dry, charred-smelling grass.

"Come to?" he heard Yurgin's voice, from a clump of bushes.

"My head is splitting," Andrei replied after a time.

"Lie still!" Yurgin ordered.

Neither of them spoke again. Each strained his ears, now slightly raising his head, now pressing to the ground. Far away on the flanks, near the main roads, guns were still thundering, but in their own vicinity, on the battalion's defence line, a deep stillness was descending, that unusual stillness for which the remote corners of the Rzhev region are noted. Now and again crows flew by, but the flapping of their wings did not break the stillness.

After breaching the defences in the centre the German tanks had driven straight through the forest towards the Vazuza. They were followed by sub-machine gunners.

With Yurgin's help Andrei had climbed out of his half-ruined trench at the last minute, when the German sub-machine gunners were close by. Then, hiding in the tall weeds, they had crawled away to a shrubby hollow. The Germans passed by without noticing them. For a long time Andrei and Yurgin lay motionless in the bushes, holding their breath. The tramping of feet, shrill whistles, bursts of sub-machine gun fire and heart-rending cries resounded over the field for about an hour. Then motor cycles and lorries bound for the Vazuza clattered for a long time over the dirt road near by. Finally quietness settled over the battalion's sector. A breeze dispersed the smells of charred iron, lubricating oil and gunpowder, and again the distinct scents of autumn took command over the battlefield.

Andrei and Matvei had been lying in the brushwood for several hours. They could have made their way to the forest a long time ago, but something was wrong with Andrei; at times he seemed to lose consciousness. After lying another half hour Matvei Yurgin's chest began to ache, and he raised himself from the ground.

"Well, rested?" he asked.

"Let's wait a bit longer," Andrei begged in a whisper.

"What, do you want to lie here until night? See how quiet it is? Not a soul around. Now we'll make a dash for the forest, and there—"

"Aren't they in the forest?"

"The Germans? They went through long ago!"

"Comrade Sergeant, let's wait a bit longer."

"Listen, Andrei, old boy," Yurgin said. "Get a grip on yourself! Didn't I see how you fought that tank? Why are you acting like this now?"

Despite the quietness that had descended over the battlefield Andrei's body was still numb with fear. He was afraid not of what awaited him ahead—he had not had time to think about that yet. He was terrified by the thought of what he had experienced on the battlefield, and he still could not believe that it was all over. His head hummed and the whistle and the roar still rang unabating in his ears; he did not believe that it was quiet all around.

After a while the grass and sweet-briar branches began to rustle again as Matvei Yurgin rose to his knees.

"Well, Andrei," he said decisively. "We must go."

"Where to?" Andrei asked dully.

"The forest. Where else?"

"Let's crawl, shall we?"

"To hell with crawling! Stand up!"

Matvei Yurgin rose to his feet and without looking round began to brush his tunic and trousers.

"A fine state of affairs ..." he muttered.

Andrei waited a few more seconds and then stood up too. His face was grey, his cheeks were sunken, and from under the rim of his helmet his round eyes looked out with a fixed stare, their clear sparkle and placidity gone.... Shoulders hunched, he looked round hurriedly, and asked in a flat voice, "Should I take my rifle?"

"Of course! What are you going to fight with? Do you think this is the end of the war? No, brother, it's only the beginning! We'll do plenty of fighting together yet! One man who's been mauled is worth two who haven't."

They started across the hollow toward the forest. The entire field was scored with the incisions of tank treads and pitted with shell-holes, as though a herd of swine had been rooting there. Much of it was scorched and blackened. The sparse forest they soon entered also bore marked traces of the battle. Many trees had bullet-

gashed trunks and their tops and branches broken off by shell splinters; the bushes had been crushed and trampled by machines and men. All the way—in field and forest—Andrei saw dead men. He was afraid to look at them, but he could not help looking; he was seeing the power and the ruthlessness of death for the first time. He glanced down at the dead men as he walked along behind Yurgin, and everything those quick glances took in fixed itself in his memory: the way the dead lay, their arms outspread and their bodies twisted by the death agony, the expressions on their faces, the leaves that had fallen on them....

Inside the forest it was already dusk. They trod lightly over the soft earth and the hummocks overgrown with moss and bilberry. In the low places, where dense bluish aspen thickets stood, the tufty sedge was still as firm and fresh as in summer. Among the dampish hummocks grew dark rings of horsetail and yellow flowers which were still trying to light up the forest gloom.

About two hundred yards inside the forest Andrei noticed another dead man. He was lying face downwards in a clump of bilberries, under a fir-tree.

"Comrade Sergeant!" Andrei stopped Yurgin with a quick whisper. "Wait a minute! Look, that's—"

"Who?"

"Our Battalion Commander!" Andrei unslung his rifle. "Comrade Senior Lieutenant! No, of course.... Good Lord, he's still warm! Where was he hit?"

Andrei grasped Loznevoi's shoulder to turn him over, but a rifle shot rang out in the forest. Yurgin dashed forward.

"Come on," he shouted. "Follow me!"

A little later, when Yurgin and Andrei had disappeared from sight among the trees, Loznevoi raised his head and cautiously peered out from behind the trunk of the

fir-tree. "Damn!" he muttered under his breath. "Why did they have to come along!" He jumped up and, crouching low, made his way towards the edge of the forest. At the sight of a dead soldier lying on his back between two mossy hummocks he stopped, knelt down and began to pull off the man's shoes. One came off easily but the other one stuck for some reason. In a hurry to finish the job, Loznevoi seized the back of the shoe and tugged at it so hard that he shifted the body from its place. Suddenly the soldier's eyelids moved.

"Water!" he moaned feebly.

Loznevoi dropped the man's foot. The next instant he was running away, weaving in and out among the trees. After running about a hundred paces he stopped near another soldier, whose awkward pose left no doubt about his being dead. There were clots of blood on his head. Loznevoi felt him warily: yes, this one was dead all right, the body was already cold. With furious haste he pulled off the man's belt, tunic, trousers and shoes. Then he gathered everything up—a dirty, sun-bleached soldier's uniform smelling of sweat and blood—and ran down into a dark thicket.

There he hurriedly changed. The uniform was too small: the trousers came up to his calves, and the sleeves barely covered his elbows. It made him look as if his arms and legs were too long for his body. "Blast the fellow!" he swore. "Why had he got to be so undersized!" He took the soldier's identity card out of the tunic pocket, read the first page and repeated to himself the name he would now have to bear. "Zarubin ... Zarubin!" Then he put the card away, carried his own uniform to a soggy spot deeper in the thicket and, without knowing why, painstakingly trampled it into the mud.

* XXIV *

While the German tanks were advancing to the Vazuza after crushing Loznevoi's battalion, all the other units of the division reached the other side of the river. Only refugees were still thronging across the bridge. The sappers waited until the last minute for the uncontrollable rush to end, and did not manage to blow up the bridge. The German tanks scattered the crowds of refugees and crossed over to the eastern bank of the Vazuza.

Zhuravsky's and Bolotin's battalions held out staunchly on the main roads, continuing to fight even after they realized that Germans had breached the regiment's positions in the central sector and reached the Vazuza. And only towards evening, when the order for withdrawal arrived from Regiment Headquarters, did they give up their positions and withdraw into the woods. The main roads were now free, and German troops immediately started to advance along them.

When evening fell the movement of German troops along the main roads ceased, and then men from all units of the regiment began to assemble in the woods. Singly and in groups they skirted the area of the bridge and made their way further up the Vazuza, where the woods were thick and dark.

... Matvei Yurgin and Andrei met several other soldiers as they picked their way through the dense forest, and in the night they joined up with quite a large group of officers and men from their own regiment.

Growing as it went, this group moved noiselessly in single file over a winding path through the pitch darkness of the forest. Behind it, jolting over the bare tree roots, followed several squeaking carts.

In the lead walked Captain Ozerov.

He was wearing a soldier's padded jacket but no cap. The bandage round his head was black from dust

and smoke. He was walking slowly and with great difficulty. Now and then he would stop short, clutch at his back and stand for a few seconds, wincing with pain and gritting his teeth. He had bruised himself badly when he fell over trying to get away from the tank.

"Why don't you get into one of the carts, Comrade Captain?" Petya Uralets kept suggesting.

"Shut up, Petya," Ozerov would answer, squeezing his orderly's shoulder hard. "I must walk and walk and walk. I'll loosen up and then everything will be all right. . . ."

As he walked he listened to the men plodding behind him. They were obedient to his will, he felt, and he realized that to rally around him these men frightened by the rout of the regiment and by the uncertainty of their position, to induce them to follow him farther, overcoming all obstacles, tonight of all nights he must lead the way. When he stopped short to listen to the sounds of the night, everybody stopped. Whenever he whispered a command back down the line, everybody hurried to carry it out. Most of the men did not know who was marching in the lead, but all felt his power over them and they submitted willingly, without a word, because he was leading them where they all wanted to go. He walked on and on, imperceptibly, yet firmly, gaining the great right that is the man's who leads the way. . . .

Even in the day-time it was always gloomy in the forest through which they were marching. On that cloudy night it was as dark as a cellar. They rarely trod on solid ground: the earth was moist and slippery underfoot. Many of the men had the feeling that they were picking their way through some abandoned slum dwelling, where they elbowed against crooked walls, and bumped their heads on various lumber hanging from the ceilings.

Again and again this painful impression brought Andrei back to those new thoughts about death which had come to him for the first time that day. That morning and the evening before, he had cherished such high hopes that the enemy would be checked on that last line. But it had not happened. He had been shaken to the depths of his being by the terrible picture of battle and the triumph of death; and, overwhelmed by all this, he now thought with bitter pain only of the fact that everything was lost—everything!

"Who's leading us?" he asked Yurgin in a whisper.

"Keep moving, don't hold up the column," Yurgin replied grimly. "He's leading us the right way. What more do you want? He's leading us—and a good thing it is, too!"

"But where to? There are Germans all round us!"

"Who said so? It's we who are all round the Germans. The deeper they go into our country the worse it is for them. But we—we're on our own territory! Now march, and keep on marching!"

After midnight the group emerged into a thinner part of the forest. Everyone sighed with relief. Here the trees could be seen, and above them the sky. It was a cloudy sky, with only a few small scattered stars shining in it, but still it was the sky. Under it the men felt lighter at heart; now they breathed easier, and the earth felt firmer underfoot. Somewhere far ahead, in the direction the group was marching, German planes had dropped flares, and the night had fled from their dead, ghastly light.

The forest thinned out and they came to the steep bank of the Vazuza. The river glistened faintly, like tar. The eastern shore was lost in the darkness, and this made the river seem broad and formidable.

Captain Ozerov sat down on the ground, leaned against a big rough rock and, unhurriedly, in a half-

whisper, began to issue commands. Only here did many of the men discover that Major Voloshin had been killed during the tank attack and it was the Second-in-Command of the regiment who was leading them. Ozerov's orders were carried out quickly and accurately. Now he was exercising not so much the power vested in him by law as that greater power which he had obtained over the men that night while leading the way.

* XXV *

Volunteer scouts went off in search of a ford across the Vazuza. The rest of the men broke up into little groups and settled down to rest along the bank.

Not far from the bank lay a thick fir-tree uprooted during a storm; it smelt of decay. When the tree fell, its roots had torn up a thick wedge of earth, which jutted into the air. Andrei sat down by it, leaned his head back on the dried sod, with its intertwining roots, and, closing his eyes, for no particular reason tried to picture the storm that had swept over the forest. "What a tree it tore up!" he reflected, and his thoughts about death filled him with even greater horror than while walking through the dark forest.

Yurgin leaned over him. "You sit here," he said, "and I'll take a stroll along the bank and see if I can find the boys from our section."

"Yes, I'll sit here," Andrei replied in a flat voice.

How long he sat by the uprooted fir-tree he did not know; again he fell into that strange state of semi-consciousness that had overcome him when he was hiding in the brushwood with Yurgin. Before his mind's eye flashed pictures of German tanks, of dead soldiers, of white pigeons circling over his native Olkhovka, bathed in the undying glow of its white birches.... Once he

even distinctly heard his father say, "Come back? But will you?"

Behind him he heard the sound of voices, and the rustle of twigs and dry grass.

"Still here?" Yurgin asked. "I've just run into a couple of our boys. Two bosom pals! They were trailing along behind us—only just caught up."

"How can a fellow walk with that bean pole!" Semyon Degtyarev said indignantly, feeling out for the fir in the darkness to sit down on it. "He's just a nuisance! He wants to sit down under every bush you come to, the devil! And you have to stand there and wait for him!"

"What we went through was enough to knock the stuffing out of anyone!" Umrikhin replied without rancour. "I hope to God I never see anything like it again!"

Umrikhin settled himself beside Andrei. Yurgin sat down too. They all lighted up. For a moment Andrei had the feeling that nothing had changed in their lives, that they had just halted in the ordinary way. But then he remembered Martyanov, Volnykh, and Glukhan.

"Is this all there are in our section now?" he asked in a quiet, thoughtful voice.

Umrikhin sighed. "Looks like it. All the rest must have been killed. We were lucky to get out of it ourselves. . . ."

"How did you get out?" Yurgin asked.

"Don't ask me, Comrade Sergeant!" Umrikhin replied. "I can't remember how we got out of that hell. We had a time of it, all right! I wonder how the Lord ever managed to protect me. They were mowing us down right and left! It was just a miracle I came out of it in one piece!"

"But you fought all right," Yurgin said. "You didn't seem to be afraid. When we were finishing off that tank—"

"Tank? Which tank?"

"You know—the one Semyon and I stopped."

"And I—was I there too?"

"You don't mean to say you've forgotten the knock you gave that tank-driver?"

"Me? Hmm!" Umrikhin squirmed with satisfaction in the darkness. "See how I fought, eh?" he exclaimed with unaffected surprise. Then he added proudly, "Naturally, I did my bit! You can't expect a man to remember everything in a mess like that!"

From the river below someone called out softly, "Go ahead, don't be afraid!" The group had begun to cross the river.

Yurgin rose. "Come on," he said.

Willow bushes snapped and pebbles crunched as men and carts moved cautiously down the bluff. From the sandbank, where there was a good fording-place, came muffled voices and the lapping of the dark water.

When Ozerov reached the eastern bank he began to direct the crossing himself. He kept hurrying the men. Occasionally he switched on his torch for an instant, and its beam broke into spangles on the rippling surface of the rapids.

"Everybody here now?" he asked when the last group of soldiers had crossed.

The men looked round at one another.

"Yes, everybody's here."

"Come on then."

But Matvei Yurgin stepped forward.

"Wait—one man is missing!"

"Who?"

"One of my men. Where has he got to? Why, he was following behind us!" Yurgin squatted to get a better view of the river. "Andrei! Andrei!" he called anxiously. "Where are you?"

* XXVI *

Andrei was to remember that night as long as he lived.

When his comrades began to cross the river he fell behind and paused on the bank. As he took off his boots he gazed at the river—and suddenly he felt as though someone had run a curry-comb down his spine. The rapids rushed by in the utter darkness, dividing the world in two. The world on his own side was now terrifying, yet it was a world Andrei knew through and through; the world on the other side was mysterious, filled with a darkness he had rarely seen the like of anywhere, and weird lights flickered in it. Now the Vazuza was a barrier dividing not only the world around him but his own life as well. What awaited him on the other side of this river? Again Andrei imagined that behind him he could distinctly hear his father's voice, "Come back? But will you?"

Andrei did not intend to fall behind the group, for at heart he was already a soldier. He was only afraid of what would happen to him on the other side of the river, and that was why he paused involuntarily on the bank. When he heard Matvei Yurgin's voice, he started up, grabbing his boots, and strode into the black waters of the Vazuza. He waded along quickly, catching his breath. In the middle he stumbled over a rock and fell forward on his chest. For an instant he was deafened by the splash. Regaining his feet, he began to hurry still more, and lost his way. He veered off sharply to the left, where the river was deep and still....

At the sound of loud splashing in the river Matvei Yurgin shouted again, "Andrei, is that you?"

Andrei somehow managed to wade ashore. Without answering Yurgin's call he started to climb up the bank,

catching at the willow bushes. By the time he reached the top he was gasping for air. Water dripped from his clothing.

"What are you shouting about?" he said wearily when he had got his breath back.

"What about? Why did you fall behind?"

Andrei shook himself. "What's the difference?" he replied, suppressing a shiver. "I lost a boot."

A knot of men formed round Andrei.

"A boot? That's bad."

"How did you manage to do that?"

"I almost got out my depth," Andrei explained in the same weary voice. "It's deep there. I only just managed to get out."

Ozerov came up. He shone his torch into Andrei's face and recognized him at once.

"What's the matter, lost your boot?"

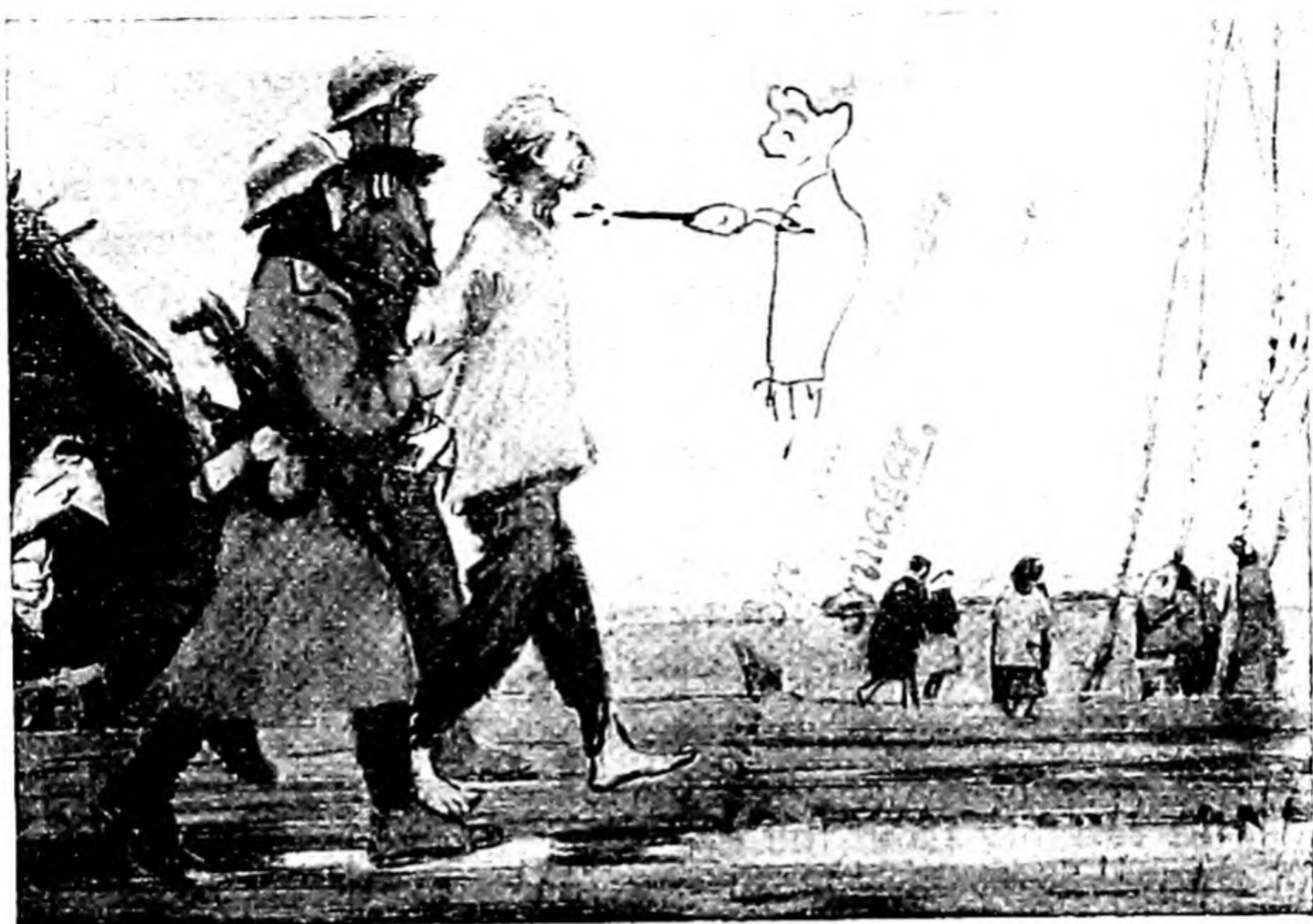
"I'll manage without it," Andrei said confusedly.

"It's a pity just the same," Ozerov said. "We mustn't waste what we have, because we haven't any more. Now what will happen? Your foot will get cold, won't it?"

"It will," Yurgin said. "And he's all wet, too. Look at him!"

"Wet? Then you take off your clothes, man," Ozerov ordered. "Comrades," he said addressing the others, "who can spare some clothes?"

The men quickly handed Andrei all the clothes he needed. But there was no extra footwear, of course, and he had to wrap foot cloths and a strip of canvas from a cape-tent round his left foot. After changing into dry clothes Andrei soon warmed up. Never before had it felt so good to be with his fellow soldiers. "We're all brothers," he thought with emotion. "Like one big family." As he marched away from the Vazuza, he rejoiced more and more in his warmth and in the happy feeling that he was with men who were as brothers to him.

And now it struck Andrei that although their regiment had suffered heavy losses it was still alive. He was so overjoyed by this thought that the feeling of desolation which had been tormenting him on the way to the river quickly vanished. Marching in with his fellow soldiers, he no longer recalled the pictures of rout and death and did not think of what awaited him ahead, beyond the endless night, with its flickering ghostly lights. He marched east, thinking of life.

PART TWO

* I *

The birds were abandoning their nesting places. Autumn, as it passed over forest, field and marsh, drove them relentlessly to alien parts without even giving them a chance to rest on the way. The melancholy calls of cranes resounded in the cold upper reaches of the air. Ducks gathered in flocks on the lakes. High above the autumn earth black clouds of starlings wheeled in the wind.

In Olkhovka the bombing near the Vazuza was heard clearly. It was followed by the muffled rumble of gun-fire. Erofei Lopukhov knew that the Germans had advanced along the main roads by-passing the village, and he realized at once that a battle had started near the river. Time

and again he came out on the steps and stared darkly at the eastern horizon. His face hardened as bitter thoughts ran through his mind.

The house became quiet as a graveyard. The members of the family sat by themselves in corners or wandered about silently, unable to take up any work. Each stole out on the steps in secret from the others and gazed with anguish at the east.

Maryika bore up better than the others, though she suffered the most. She lived through that day—a day filled with the rustle of falling leaves—listening apprehensively to the whisperings of her heart.

Late in the afternoon Erofei realized with a start that the pit under the mountain ash in which he had hidden his grain and belongings the day before had to be concealed reliably from the eyes of strangers.

"Sorrow is sorrow, but there's a job to be done," he said. "The Germans may be here before we know it. We ought to cover up that pit better."

Alevtina, his wife, whose strength had completely failed her after seeing Andrei off, was sitting in the scullery, leaning on the window-sill. "Why don't you?" she whispered without moving her sad weary gaze from the hazy band of woods in the distance.

"Come on!" Erofei said, turning to Maryika and Vasya. "When we've covered it up, I'll feel easier in my mind."

They went out into the vegetable garden. In the corner of the garden, behind the shed, three cartloads of rye straw which Erofei had earned on the collective farm had been hastily piled. With this they decided to cover the pit. Erofei and Maryika carried big bunches of straw on pitchforks to Vasya, who skilfully spread out the straw and trampled it down. The stack under Vasya rose higher and higher, and after they had been working half an hour he

began to reach down clusters of crimson berries from the top branches of the tree.

Vasya was an observant boy; he had noticed how worried Maryika was, and kept trying to console her as best he could.

"Maryika, just look at these berries," he said, holding up some big clusters that he had just picked. "Want them?"

"Throw some down, Vasya."

"I'll get you the best ones!" the boy exclaimed happily. "Look!"

"Hey you there!" Erofei shouted at Vasya from the shed. "What are you yelling for? Do you want people to see what we're doing? And what are you spoiling the tree for? Stop breaking the branches!"

"Squawk away, you old corn-crake!" Vasya whispered with a hostile glance at his father. "Catch, Maryika! Gosh, what berries!"

Maryika caught the large, heavy twig thickly hung with clusters of berries, and the moment she looked at it she recalled a sunny spring day soon after her wedding when she had come out to work in the vegetable garden and had stood with Andrei under this mountain ash. Then a myriad of frothy white blossoms had fluttered overhead. It seemed such a short time ago.... Yet the mountain ash had not only shed its blossom, it had already brought forth these rich red clusters of berries.

Erofei came up.

"Maryika, why are you standing there doing nothing? Finish first and then you can play about!"

Maryika made no reply. She thrust her pitchfork into a heap of straw and tried to lift it, but could not. Her soft warm lips parted and turned a deep scarlet. She shook her head, sending her kerchief down to her shoulders. Then, bending her slender girlish figure, she made

another attempt to lift the straw, but again she was not equal to it.

"I can't!" she said barely audibly. She threw down the pitchfork and stepped over to the mountain ash. "It will pass in a minute. . . ."

"Predicting?"

Maryika turned her head. "What do you mean?"

"Your heart, of course!"

"Leave me alone, Father," Maryika responded, leaning on the trunk of the tree.

Suddenly Vasya shook one of the upper branches and shouted, "Look, Dad, they're coming!"

The pitchfork in Erofei's hands trembled.

"The Germans?"

"No, women! Look like ours, I think. Over there!"

Erofei flared up. "You little brat! What do you mean by frightening me, you shock-headed little devil? Why didn't you say so straightaway? You need a couple of pokes with this pitchfork to teach you a lesson! Phew! I even went all cold inside!"

From the east a small train of carts was moving up the hill towards the village. Behind the carts, loaded down with bundles, walked weary, dejected women and children who in the past two days had grown haggard and older. Glancing up at their native village, now placid under the birches, they muttered among themselves.

"We'll see bitter times here now!"

"Oh, God help us!"

"Get ready to swing now!"

As the group drew level with the Lopukhov vegetable garden, a woman with a whip, wearing boots and a shabby man's jacket tightly pulled in at the waist by a coloured sash, turned aside to the fence.

"Hey!" she called out. "The Germans not here yet?"

Maryika dashed over to the fence. "Mother! Mother dear!"

After waiting a little Erofei went over to the fence too. Maryika was standing near the cart, still hugging her younger sister, Faya, an olive-skinned girl with black eyes like her own, who was just entering upon adolescence.

Anfissa Logova, a tall, well-built woman of about fifty with a vivacious face and dark eyes that still held a youthful sparkle, hushed her daughters, then called out, "Drive on, women. What have you stopped for?"

The women passed round her cart and drove on into the village. Anfissa turned to the fence.

"So they haven't been here yet?" she asked again after greeting Erofei.

"Not yet, thank God!"

"All we could think about on the way here was, suppose the Germans are in the village already when we reach it. They'll tear us to shreds, we were thinking."

"They shouldn't. What have women got to do with it?"

"Oh, they don't care!"

Erofei lit a cigarette. "Where've you come back from?" he asked.

"From Black Spring."

"So the road was blocked from there on?"

"We couldn't go any farther."

"Yes, those soldiers of ours dodged through here fast enough." Erofei let the smoke out through his nostrils. "Left the village without doing any fighting."

"Do you call that running away?" Anfissa said, looking past Erofei. "Wait till the Germans start to run—then you'll see some running! A deal faster than our soldiers! You just won't believe your eyes. You know the saying: come uninvited and go away blighted!"

"Of course, if our army gets the strength. . . ."

"It will!" Anfissa hit the top fence rail so hard with the handle of her whip that Erofei started back. "In his own nest, even a crow will claw anyone's eyes out. Did you ever hear that?" Now that she was roused, her face

appeared younger. "No, they won't find our bread to their liking!"

About the battle near the Vazuza, Anfissa knew nothing at all. She talked about Andrei for a while and then got ready to drive on home. Erofei bid her an amicable good-bye. "Look in to see us when you have the time, Anfissa!"

Anfissa returned the invitation. "You drop in too, kinsman."

Erofei stood a minute longer at the fence, watching Anfissa go. She took up the reins like a man, whipped the lean horse across the back and, when it started up the slope, set out beside the cart with big strides. Erofei wagged his head.

"A strong woman!" he said in an envious tone. "No matter which way life throws that kind of woman she'll always land on her feet, like a cat. And she's probably got a cat's eyesight, too—good in the day-time and still better at night."

"What's bad about that?" Maryika asked, climbing the fence.

"She's that sort!" her father-in-law replied evasively.

When she first saw her mother, Maryika had been alarmed because her mother had not succeeded in fleeing from the Germans, but now she was glad her mother had not left. Now she knew that there was someone in the village who would always help her if anything went wrong. This made her feel better, and when she resumed work she even forgot about her worries for a little. Her father-in-law, on the contrary, became noticeably depressed after seeing his kinswoman, and he worked on in silence. Only when the stack was finished and slanting poles had been set up round it, did he speak.

"The things are safely hidden," he said moodily. "But where can I hide my soul for the time being?"

All that evening refugees kept returning. The village

became more populated, but it still seemed just as deserted as it had been in the past two days; everyone was hiding, fearfully awaiting the arrival of the invaders.

After nightfall Erofei walked round his farm-yard three times without stopping. As he walked, feeling along the fence, stumbling in holes in the dark and pushing his way through the withered but still firm burdock, he kept whispering, now to himself, now out loud, breathing heavily:

"... Against the enemy, come he on horse or foot ... and also against plague and famine ... against fire and destruction ... and the Evil Eye. ..."

When he had finished the exorcism he went into the storeroom with a little lamp and searched out a pale fleshy stalk with scanty underdeveloped leaves, called Peter's Cross, which he had picked and had been saving since summer. He wrapped it in a cloth and hung it over the outside door to bring good luck to the house.

* II *

After the dense birch wood the road came out to a small stream. The cart rattled over the little wooden bridge. From here it was less than two miles to Olkhovka; had it been day-time, the village on its broad and pretty hill would have come into view. But the earth was shrouded in utter darkness. Not a single light was visible in Olkhovka.

When the cart sank into a rut just on the other side of the bridge, Stepan Boyarkin prodded Serga Hakhai, the salesman at the Olkhovka general store, who was driving.

"Stop," he said with a sigh. "This'll do."

Another cart rattled on to the bridge and stopped. Four men jumped down from it almost simultaneously and gathered round Stepan Boyarkin. He was bending over near the back wheel, feeling his leg.

"Does it hurt?"

"No," Boyarkin whispered. "It's gone numb from sitting on it."

"That's not so, Stepan!"

Boyarkin straightened up. "Well, there's no need to drive on to Olkhovka," he said. "Who knows? Perhaps the Germans are there already. No use getting killed just like that. From here you take that track over there." He motioned to the right. "And then follow the fringe of the woods. You know the way, Serga?"

"I do," Hakhai answered out of the darkness.

"And wait for me at Elk Forest. I'll be there by daybreak."

"Are you going to call in at home?"

"They're not expecting me at home. Stepan Boyarkin drove on towards Moscow. I've got one or two things to see to."

Boyarkin rummaged about inside the cart.

"Do you want the rifle?" Serga asked.

"What for now? Where's my stick?"

"Here, take it."

"Mind you don't lose my boot. Better watch out if you do!"

Hakhai gave a mirthless chuckle. "You just mind you bring your legs back. Taking care of boots is easy."

"That's right, Stepan. You be careful there," one of the others advised.

Before setting out Boyarkin looked about him.

"What a night!" he sighed. "It's come over our whole lives now."

Despite the cold, Boyarkin flung open his jacket. He set out for Olkhovka, limping on his left foot, on which he wore a shoe, and feeling the way in the dark with his stick.

On the slope of the hill just outside the village he sat down to rest on a roadside stone which he had known

since he was a boy. From his position on the slope he could see far ahead along the main roads, and in the east, where the war had rolled on, he noticed the glow of big fires beyond the forests. Above his native village a few scattered stars shone faintly in the dull sky, the entire countryside was enveloped in an ominous silence.

Stepan Boyarkin had come to see a man—Osip Mikhailovich, the storekeeper at the collective farm. Osip Mikhailovich lived in the centre of the village, however, and getting to his house was dangerous. "Who could I call on first?" Boyarkin pondered. He had told all the collective-farm women who had been with him during the strafing and had then headed for home that he would make his way east no matter what happened. By this time all Olkhovka knew it, and Boyarkin wanted the rumour kept alive as long as it suited his purpose. "What's the use of guessing! I'll go to the Lopukhovs," Boyarkin decided. "I'll find out the situation and then see what to do."

He rose from the stone, crossed the road, and, tapping cautiously with his stick, made for the Lopukhov vegetable garden. In the dark he bumped into the fence. Only as he was climbing over it did he remember that the Lopukhovs had the most vicious dog in the village. It would raise a noise that would set all the Olkhovka dogs barking. Without making a sound he climbed down from the fence. He started to go over the villagers in his mind again and his natural choice fell upon a relative of the Lopukhovs—the widow Anfissa Logova. She was a firm, honest woman who could be fully relied upon under any circumstances. Besides, it was easy to reach her house, which stood near the southern edge of the village.

Half an hour later Stepan Boyarkin was in Anfissa's house. She was not even surprised to see him back. She curtained the windows in the dark, lit a lamp and, surveying Boyarkin, remarked:

"Why do you go about like that? Wouldn't it be better to put on both boots?"

Boyarkin had no sooner finished his hastily served supper than Anfissa brought in Osip, an elderly man with a grizzled moustache and a stern, soldierly air. During the Civil War he had been wounded in the leg by a shell splinter, and had been using a heavy birch stick ever since. He greeted Boyarkin and then nodded at the latter's foot.

"They say you're hurt. Do you limp?"

Boyarkin laughed it off. "You're not the only one who can limp."

Before long the conversation turned to the topic Boyarkin had come to discuss. Carefully gathering up the crumbs from the table, he threw them into his mouth and started on the next slice of fragrant rye bread.

"This year's?"

"We milled it together," Anfissa replied.

"It's good bread!"

"Don't know if you'll eat any more like it now," Osip said, laying his birch stick beside his stiff right leg. "There's a rumour that the mill has been damaged. And what kind of bread can you get from flour ground in a mortar?"

Boyarkin pointed to the partition with his spoon. "Is Faya asleep?"

"Drums wouldn't wake her," Anfissa assured him.

Boyarkin bent forward over his cup. "How much have we threshed?"

"I'd have to look that up," the storekeeper replied. "In the old granary there's not much left for delivery to the state, and in the new one there's seed."

"Is there much state grain?"

"A ton and a half."

"Well, you'll deliver it to the state."

Osip raised his stern, furrowed face with its bushy grey moustache.

"To the state? But how—where?"

"Where I tell you. What—haven't we got a state? You'll deliver it one of these days, or rather, nights. The man you'll give it to is Serga Hakhai. I'll tell you where later on. And I'll send men to help you with the job. It has to be done secretly."

The storekeeper understood. "All right, Stepan," he agreed.

Boyarkin finished his supper in silence. Then he rolled a cigarette and lit it from the lamp. The dim light accentuated his thinness and pallor. But his big, bright, hazel eyes burned with unusual vitality and energy.

"What about the seed?" Osip asked.

Boyarkin reflected a long time, puffing his cigarette. Selected grain, the very best, had been set aside for seed. If the Germans came down on them it was lost. On the other hand, he did not want to distribute it. All the collective farmers' prospects for the spring were associated with that grain. If it were distributed many of them would take it to mean that the authorities themselves did not believe that the army would soon return, or that the collective farm would be able to sow in the spring.

"Hide it!" he said at last in a decisive tone.

"How?"

"Think of a way. You're not a kid. But do it so that all the collective-farm people know the grain is untouched and safely hidden away till spring."

Somewhere in the village a dog began to bark. Stepan Boyarkin quickly turned to the window, thrust his head behind the coloured blanket and stared into the darkness for a few seconds. Again the barking sounded. Boyarkin covered the window.

"That's our dog!" he exclaimed, his face lighting up with a faint smile.

"Who's she barking at?" Anfissa asked anxiously.

"Nobody in particular, just barking. . . ."

Boyarkin leaned his elbows heavily on the table.

"Well, so there's nobody to thresh the stacks, and no time to do it. Right?"

"How can we?" Osip said. "Let them stand."

"The grain may spoil," Anfissa said. "We stacked it in a hurry. If the rain seeps through, it'll rot."

"It won't rot," Osip assured them.

Boyarkin leaned back against the wall and said firmly, "It doesn't matter. Burn them!"

"The stacks?"

"Burn them!" Boyarkin repeated. "And as soon as you can. You won't have time to take them apart, and when the Germans come they'll make you thresh them, and then they'll take the grain away or else feed it to their horses. But we must not give them a single kernel. Burn the stacks!"

Anfissa walked over to the stove, leaned her head against it and covered her eyes with her hands.

"All that grain!" she said through tears. "After all the work we put into it!"

"I know. Never mind—burn it!"

Osip's moustache began to quiver. "No, Stepan! If you make me set fire to my house, I'll do it straightaway. But, Stepan, I can't touch the collective-farm grain!"

"Forgotten what was said?"

"By whom?"

"By Comrade Stalin!"

"I understand everything," Osip replied after a slight pause. "The whole situation. But I can't do it, Stepan. My heart isn't strong enough. If I put a torch to the stacks I'll jump into the fire myself. No, you can kill me, Stepan, but I can't touch the collective-farm grain! All that wealth!"

"You're weak!"

Boyarkin looked at Anfissa. "What about you?"

"I'll do it," she replied in a whisper.

It was hard on Stepan Boyarkin too. A heavy, choking weight bore down on his chest. He rose from the bench and stood near the window, running his long, lean fingers over the blanket covering it. Then suddenly he wheeled round, his face paled.

"I also thought I could never do a thing like that . . ." he said, his eyes flashing. "But I tried—and I did! Times have changed. Now there's other work for our hands. And we've got to show how strong they are!"

Osip and Anfissa stared at the chairman in surprise. No, this was a totally different Stepan Boyarkin, totally different from the man Olkhovka had known before. . . .

* III *

Only a handful of men were left in Olkhovka. All the able-bodied men of service age had long since been mobilized for army service. Some of the men with medical exemption who had been evacuated earlier had managed to make their way through towards Moscow. About the others nothing was known. In almost all the houses with unboarded windows women had taken over the reins of management. The women joked bitterly about the men remaining in the village.

"Call them men? They're a lot of wrecks!"

"Yes, that they are, indeed!"

. . . The following day Maryika visited her mother. She found a noisy gathering of women in the house. Here were Lukeria Boyarkina, the collective-farm chairman's wife, with her baby; Ulyana Shutyaeva, with eyes swollen from crying over her daughter, who had been killed during the bombing; a young soldier's wife Panya Goryunova, and several others from the south end of the

village. In the middle of the conversation a youngster tapped on the window and flattened his stubby nose against the pane.

"They're bringing back prisoners!" he shouted. "Ours!"

Anfissa turned to the window. "What do you mean, ours?"

"You know, Russians!"

"The Germans are?!"

"Who do you think? There they come!"

The women all started to talk at once.

"Good gracious, what shall we do?"

"I hope nothing happens!"

"We've got to run away and hide, women!"

But Anfissa spoke sharply. "Come on, women! Quick!"

A column of prisoners was marching down the main street in a cloud of dust. It did not stop until it reached the well under the willows at the western end of the village. The German in the unfamiliar greenish-grey army coat who was marching at the head of the column shouted something in a shrill voice and unslung the burnished submachine gun hanging at his chest. The first two prisoners walked up to the well. The bucket clattered. Whispers passed through the crowd of frightened women and children who had gathered near the outlying houses of the village.

"Going to give them a drink!"

"Lord, how many prisoners!"

"Any from our village?"

"Those Germans, just look at them!"

"What shifty eyes they have!"

"Goodness, what a lanky lot they are!"

"Not so loud!"

The sun was sinking towards the west. A faint thread of smoke curled above the dark and silent forest in the distance; it marked the passing of a train from Vyazma

to Rzhev. The prisoners were probably being driven to the nearest station, on the other side of Elk Forest.

One of the prisoners, a tall man with piercing eyes and a dark stubble on his lean cheeks, pulled up the bucket, set it on the edge of the well and greedily put his lips to it. He drank in noisy gulps, his eyes bulging frenziedly. The cold water made his throat contract, and he tore himself away from the bucket, gasping for breath. But he did not step away from the well. When the next prisoner, a blond young fellow with a bruised and discoloured face, had drunk his fill, he took the bucket again and squatted on his haunches. Noticing this, one of the guards gave a bird-like squawk and hit him on the shoulder with his sub-machine gun. The prisoner with the wild eyes fell over. Fearing another blow for having fallen, he rose hastily to his feet. The German waved him to the other side of the well with his gun.

"*Weiter*!"

They're hitting them, the devils!" Lukeria Boyarkina exclaimed.

Her companions hushed her. "Not so loud, silly!"

"Women!" Anfissa commanded, casting a stern glance around her. "Get bread and food! And be quick about it!"

The women scurried away to their homes.

The well-sweep creaked and the bucket clattered. The column of prisoners moved past the well, at which the leading guard stood with a sub-machine gun, his goose-like neck outstretched and his lips compressed as if over toothless gums. Flanking the column stood six tall ungainly Germans—all the same height, as though picked to match—in long, strange-coloured army coats.

"*Vorwärts*!" they shouted, prodding the prisoners along with their sub-machine guns.

Maryika was the first to return with a loaf of bread.

"Give it to me," Anfissa demanded.

"Mum, let me—"

"Give it to me!"

Just then a commotion broke out at the rear of the column. All the way one of the prisoners, a tall, thin man, had barely managed to keep up, and at the halt his legs gave way completely and he crumpled lifelessly to the ground. His comrades called out and stooped to pick him up. With shouts three of the fascists rushed up to the knot of prisoners who had broken ranks and began to separate them, wielding their gun butts furiously. The prisoners were driven to their places. The Germans crowded round the fallen man and began to shower kicks on him and tug at his arms and tunic to get him to his feet.

"Mother, wait," Maryika said, frightened.

"That's all right, daughter, I'll go."

Anfissa strode boldly to the rear of the column.

"Hey, you!" she shouted to the guards.

The Germans released the prisoner and looked round. Not understanding why the woman was approaching, one of them shouted at her threateningly. Involuntarily Anfissa stopped short.

"What you want?" the German asked in halting Russian.

"Why, I—this bread, look," Anfissa said, pointing to the loaf and explaining by gestures that she wanted to give it to the prisoners. "Give it to them, give it to them! They're starved! Just look at them!"

Many of the prisoners turned round to listen to Anfissa. A murmur passed down the column. Even the men standing at the head of the column, beyond the willows, turned round.

The German came up to Anfissa, took the loaf of bread with a displeased air, examined it and then handed it over to the prisoners.

"*Mach, daß du fortkommst!*"* he shouted at Anfissa.

Now the other women were returning with bread and various articles of food they had hastily snatched up. Emboldened, they walked up to the column from both sides. The senior corporal—the man who had taken the bread from Anfissa—barked out an order. The guards started shouting and raised their sub-machine guns threateningly. With frightened screams the women scattered.

Maryika had no food, but she had approached the column with the others and was casting a hasty, inquiring glance over the prisoners. When the women scattered she did not move. By that time the middle of the column had reached the well, but the prisoner who had fallen down still could not get to his feet. He sat on the ground with his bare feet sprawled out and his grimy head thrown back. His fingers were spread out in the dust. Beside the prisoner, wondering what to do with him, stood the German senior corporal.

Maryika looked down and gave a start. "It's him!" She recognized Loznevoi. A sudden decision flashed through her mind. Impetuously she ran up to the senior corporal, her face flushing a deep red.

"Leave him! Leave him here!" She did not ask, she demanded, with fearless and blazing feminine resolution.

The senior corporal had just reached the conclusion that the prisoner was unable to go on and that he would have to be shot, as a number of others had been shot on the way. But Maryika's sudden appearance prevented him from deciding the prisoner's fate irrevocably. He looked at Maryika and froze in astonishment: before him stood a young Russian *frau*, a real beauty.... She wore a reddish plush garment, open at the neck. Her head was

* Go away!

uncovered and her hair was combed down smoothly in the Russian fashion. From her shoulders hung a coloured shawl. Quick and impetuous, she was not asking something but demanding it as though she knew that because of her beauty everything would be forgiven her; and she was demanding with such fire and such fearless determination that the corporal could not tear his gaze from her. What a miracle to come upon in such an isolated village! Obeying an unconscious impulse to appear gallant in Maryika's eyes, he threw out his chest and smoothed his forelock, which hung in a limp, dusty curl. Finally he grasped what the Russian beauty wanted.

"Who is he?" he asked, forming the words precisely.

"My husband!" Maryika burst out on an impulse. "My husband!" she repeated.

Loznevoi shifted his grimy head to the right. He fixed a vacant stare on Maryika. Then he must have comprehended what fate was preparing for him, for he began to drag his broken body towards Maryika, clawing convulsively at the dust.

"My husband! My husband!" Maryika continued to shout, pointing at the prisoner and then at herself. "He's mine! Understand? Mine!"

"Aha!" The German had understood at last.

"He's mine, mine!"

"Is it a trick?" the German asked suspiciously, recalling his duty. "*Nein*?"

"No, he's my man, he's mine!"

The other women had gathered round again. They exchanged uncomprehending glances.

"They'll tell you!" Maryika cried, turning to them with a look that explained everything. "Everybody will tell you! He's my husband!"

"Yes?" the German said, not finding any other word to say.

The women began to talk all at once.

"He's her husband! Her husband!"

"She's telling the truth!"

"He's from this village! He's her husband!"

The corporal could hardly tear his gaze from Maryika. "That's romantic!" he thought. "Her husband is in my power. If I kill him now she'll be an unhappy woman, and if I let him go she'll be happy the rest of her life." Every minute increased the corporal's desire to appear gallant in Maryika's eyes. To his own surprise, he reached a sudden decision to please this Russian beauty. Twisting his lips into a smile, he pointed to the prisoner and then waved his hand towards the middle of the village.

"Take!" he said expansively. "Yours! Take!"

But here he noticed that many of the women standing round the beauty were holding parcels of food. He forgot his chivalrous sentiments and, feeling that after all some sort of compensation was due to him for the prisoner, pointed first to the parcels and then to himself.

"Eggs! Butter! Give! Pork—give!"

"Give him the food, women," Anfissa ordered.

The moment they started to hand over the parcels the other Germans appeared out of nowhere. Exchanging brief remarks, the Germans inspected the bread and the pies, poked their fingers into the butter, and turned over the eggs in the baskets.

"They're good, they're good," Maryika assured them.

"They're fresh as can be," Lukeria Boyarkina confirmed. "Hold them up to the sun and see for yourself."

At the word sun the corporal straightened up from the basket of eggs and looked towards the west. The sun now hung low over the distant forest. The bright colours of day were beginning to fade.

"*Wir müssen gehen*," he said rapidly. "*Es ist Zeit*!"*

* It is time we went.

The other Germans grabbed everything the women brought and fell in with the column. The corporal waved his hand at Loznevoi, who was still sitting on the ground.

"Take! Take!" he said winking obscenely at Maryika. "Husband? Take!"

"*Ach, ich verstehe*!" he explained to his men with a lewd grin. "*Eine so reizende Frau braucht einen Mann, um ihre Schönheit zu erhalten.*"*

The column started out of the village.

* VI *

Loznevoi scarcely managed to reach the Lopukhov house. He dropped in exhaustion on the steps. Maryika ran inside. In a few moments the whole family came running out. Loznevoi lay on the steps, helplessly shifting his dirty feet.

"Is it him?" Erofei asked in amazement.

"Yes, it's him, it's him!" Maryika whispered.

"So it is. Water!"

With difficulty Loznevoi got up on his knees. Water was poured into his cupped hands. He slowly washed his face, rinsed his mouth and then looked up at the Lopukhovs.

"They knocked a tooth out," he said. "See?"

Erofei took a deep breath. "What's a tooth!" he remarked. Then, feeling the time had come to ask questions, he sat down on the steps. "How did it happen, eh?"

Maryika handed Loznevoi an embroidered towel. He wiped his face and hands leisurely.

"Yes, a tooth is nothing," he agreed. "But it's a miracle I wasn't killed. All the officers and commissars were—"

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* Oh, I understand. Such a pretty woman needs a husband to prevent her beauty from fading.

"Given away?"

"What was there to give away? After they lined us up they could see it at once. They made everybody whose hair wasn't cropped step out of the line.* And what they did! Right on the spot! It's my luck I shaved my head in your house then. . . ."

"But whose uniform is that?"

"Why, that—" Loznevoi surveyed himself in embarrassment, recalling the smart, well-fitting uniform in which he had walked up the steps of the Lopukhov house three days before. "Well, it was the only way. A man'll do anything to stay alive."

"Of course. . . ."

"Yes. . . . Only everything's too small for me."

"How did it happen, eh?" Erofei repeated.

Instead of replying Loznevoi merely waved the towel. Unable to hold back the question any longer, Maryika sat down on the steps and asked in a voice quivering with emotion, "But what about Andrei? Where is he? Why don't you say something?"

Loznevoi had been expecting this question. While washing he had remembered Andrei's coming upon him in the forest and then running away into the shadow of the trees after Yurgin. But now it occurred to him that most likely Andrei would never return, and that he would probably have to make a long stay in the Lopukhov house.

"What can I tell you?" Loznevoi glanced down at Maryika and then shifted his eyes to the others. "What can I say?" He stared fixedly in front of him, as though deeply moved. "Many died there."

Maryika crumpled in despair on the steps. . . .

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* Privates in the Soviet Army are required to wear their hair clipped short.—*Tr.*

* V *

There was no sun that day. The world was shrouded in gloom, as if the dawn had never fully risen. The eye could distinguish the contours of the little hills and rises, especially the wooded ones, but all the hollows and gullies were lost in obscurity. Everything looked drab and monotonous. There was a cold wind.

Maryika was walking through a lonely fir forest. She had flung open her plush jacket and pushed her shawl back off her head. Her quick black eyes darted about unceasingly in search of something. The forest grew in a marshy area. The ground was hummocky, and in places spongy; every now and then her foot swished over growths of moss and firm bilberry plants.

All of a sudden she stopped and clasped her hands to her breast. She held her breath, her gaze fixed on one spot. She stood still a moment, then moved forward cautiously, afraid to make a noise with her feet on the bilberries and moss. Under a short but bushy fir lay a man in army uniform. Maryika went to within five paces of him and stopped, but suddenly she let out a cry and dashed forward.

The man was dead. He lay on his chest with his face in a clump of bilberries; his arms were bent at the elbows and thrown forward, as though in his last moment he had wanted to clasp the little hummock in front of him. He was a tall, robust, broad-shouldered man. His tunic and his dark bristly head were smeared with mud.

It was all as Loznevoi had described it to her: the thin forest, the fir, and under the fir—him. . . . Maryika did not remember dropping to her knees beside the body. She rocked from side to side, clutching at the moss, not knowing what to do. "Dear God, it's him!" her whole being cried out. "My poor darling!" She took the dead man by the shoulders and with an effort turned him over

on his back; the stiff body was as heavy as a sodden log. The face was grey and lean, and it had a small moustache. Maryika recoiled in horror.

Only when she looked round did she notice other bodies among the hummocks, in the clumps of bilberries and golden ferns. She sprang to her feet and, trembling to think that in another second she might scream out at the top of her voice, she ran away.

There were just as many bodies, however, in the place she was running to. She swerved off in another direction. Again bodies lay all round. She could have turned back, but behind her lay the moustached stranger with eyes wide open. . . . With a faltering heart she rushed forward out of this forest of the dead, stumbling over the growths of moss and bilberry.

. . . Loznevoi had described the battle area in detail. He said he had seen Andrei lying at the foot of a fir-tree, bleeding to death. This news had broken Maryika's spirit. All the evening she had lain motionless on the bed in the best room. During the night she realized that she could endure it no longer unless she saw Andrei, even if only his dead body. She wanted to sit beside him under that fir-tree where he had been stricken by the enemy bullet, and sob out her grief to him. She wanted to look at his beloved face, and his big affectionate hands. She wanted to bury him herself, and then, in bitter solitude, to visit his grave. And in the middle of the night she came to a decision to go to the battlefield and find her dead Andrei.

At dawn she awakened her father-in-law.

"Get up, Father, and come," she said, just as though the evening before they had agreed on the trip and he knew where they were going. "Get up. It is growing light already."

Erofei did not know what it was all about. "Where to?" he asked.

"To look for Andrei!"

"Oh, my darling Andrei!" Alevtina moaned, as she had been moaning all night long. "Oh, my poor boy!" She wanted to support her daughter-in-law but she was unable to speak; all she could do was sigh. "Oh, my dear boy!"

During the night Erofei himself had been thinking about searching for Andrei.

"Stop your wailing. We're going," he assured his wife and daughter-in-law as he climbed out of bed. "I meant to all along."

Before they left, Erofei again asked Loznevoi to describe the place where his son lay. Loznevoi expressed regret at not being able to accompany them and again described the forest in which he had seen the dying Andrei.

"But will you find him? You don't know the place."

"I do. We'll look. After all, he's my son."

And so Maryika and Erofei had come to the site of the recent battle. The battle had left its mark on the thin fir forest. They frequently passed shell craters, scorched patches and hastily dug trenches, the bottoms of which were now covered with black water. Near the trenches lay rifles, some broken, others intact, but all covered with a thick layer of rust; hand grenades in their cases; cartridge belts with clips in them, and scattered empty cartridges that had turned bright green with mould. There were crushed and dirty knapsacks with modest soldiers' belongings, torn cape-tents spattered with dark blood spots, respirators, dented water-bottles, helmets with bullet holes in them. . . .

Not knowing what she was doing, Maryika dashed out of the forest.

As she walked on over the field she could not help looking back at the forest which still retained those terrible pictures of death. And suddenly it seemed to Maryika that behind her there were women roaming all over the

battlefield. They walked in silence, looking at the craters made by shells and bombs, at the caved-in trenches, at the arms and equipment scattered everywhere. They paused over the dead and bowed down to examine their faces. They walked in silence. The faces of all were dark and stern. A harsh wind beat their clothing.

Maryika wiped her eyes; she had not noticed before that she was crying. She threw up her hands and shouted with all her strength to those who followed her, "What is it?! What is it for?! What for?"

No one answered. The women walked on in silence.

Maryika had come to the battlefield taken up with her own grief. But when she saw how many men had perished there she realized that she was not alone in her sorrow. It was shared by many. By the entire nation. Was this the only place in the country drenched in blood? Were these the only ones to meet an untimely end on the broad expanses of her native land? These reflections did not allay Maryika's grief, but black hatred of those who had come from the west sowing death suddenly welled up in her heart. Then she felt better, firmer; for hatred, like an elixir of life, gives strength.

. . . Erofei stood beside the cart, puffing at a cigarette. At the sight of Maryika his face twisted into a grimace of pain. He shook his head, and tears glistened on his cheeks and on his fair beard.

"My heart felt it!" he quavered. "Oh, it felt it!" Again he shook his head.

Maryika came up to the cart. "Let us go, Father."

"Oh, Andrei, Andrei!" Erofei sighed. He threw away the cigarette and went up to the horse.

Maryika's face instantly changed colour when she saw in the cart two neatly folded cape-tents.

"I—I just picked it up on the way—" Erofei began in embarrassment, "It's all good stuff. Couldn't let it go to waste. . . ."

Maryika tore her furious gaze from Erofei, walked round the cart and set out impetuously towards the road.

"Where are you going, Maryika? What's the matter?" Erofei called out, gathering up the reins.

Maryika halted. "Go by yourself," she replied in a low voice. "I shall walk."

Erofei followed her with his eyes a long time, his nostrils twitching. When her shawl began to bob up over the bushes he spat on the ground. "Bah, what a touchy creature!"

* VI *

Towards evening the weather turned altogether bad. Endless murky clouds moved low over the dark fields and forests. Every now and then the wind swept the earth with fine sleet or a flurry of snow.

A passing refugee gave Maryika a lift in his cart as far as Olkhovka. It was almost dark when she parted with her companion and took the short cut up through the gully to the vegetable garden. Tired and cold, she made her way over the snowy path with difficulty. Just as she neared the steam bath a man came out of the door. She fell back with a cry.

The man was in army uniform, but barefoot and without a cap or a belt. Despite the twilight Maryika took him in at a glance: he was very young, fair-haired, and his face was swollen and covered with bruises; his right eye was a narrow slit in a puffy and discoloured socket.

"D-don't be afraid," he stammered in a whisper to the speechless Maryika, parting his lips in a simple, good-natured smile. "W-what are you afraid of?"

He gave a shiver and came out on the path.

"A-any Germans in the village?"

"No, there aren't," Maryika replied, taking another step back.

"What are you af-fraid of? Don't you recognize me?"

"My goodness!" Maryika exclaimed softly. "Can it be you, Kostya?"

"Of c-course it's me."

"How you scared me! What are you doing here?"

"T-take me into the house," Kostya said. He shuffled his bare feet on the snowy ground. "See? I'll tell the story inside. Isn't it cold! Looks as if winter's coming."

"Lord, your feet! Come on in!"

"For that I'll say th-thanks!"

"Wait—why are you stuttering like that?"

"Shell-shock," Kostya explained. "The Battalion Commander—is he in your house?"

"Your commander? Yes."

"I knew it. Well, l-let's get going! I'm frozen stiff. I've been wanting to go in a long time," Kostya confessed as he strode along after Maryika. "But I'm afraid of your father-in-law."

Maryika turned. "Why?"

"Keep walking, keep walking. You won't tell? He's k-kind of ignorant."

Erofei was at home. On the way back to Olkhovka he had caught a sturdy light-grey army horse in a grove near the road; at that time many horses were left straying about the countryside, frightened by the war. He had taken the horse as a gift from God, and had been busy in the barn till dark fixing up a stall. But the sudden good fortune had not made Erofei forget his tiff with Maryika. "What a plague she is!" he muttered to himself, thinking about his unsubmissive daughter-in-law. "Just look at all the disturbance she causes in the house. Nothing suits her, nothing! Every day it's something new. Today she dragged me God knows where. And then there's that officer she brought in.... She brought him in without thinking what for. What use is he now? Only

an extra mouth to feed. And all the bother! And now she's up in the air over nothing. Suppose I did take those tents.... What about it? At a time like this anything may come in handy...."

No sooner was Erofei indoors than Maryika came in. When he saw Kostya in the doorway behind her, all bruised and blue with the cold, he was staggered by this fresh blow from fate. It cost him a great effort to restrain his fury. Without acknowledging Kostya's greeting he watched him walk to the door of the best room, where Loznevoi lay.

"Is that the last of 'em?" he flung out over his shoulder at Maryika, breathing heavily and angrily. "Or will there be some more?"

There was a shout from the best room. Loznevoi threw off his blanket and started to get up.

"Kostya? You too? You here too?"

Alevtina, Maryika and Vasya looked on with interest from the doorway. Kostya glanced at them with his sound left eye and pointed to his feet with a guilty smile.

"I'll make a mess of your floor...."

"Never mind, never mind," said Alevtina.

"Kostya, old man, what happened to you? Tell me."

Kostya wiped his wet, swollen face with his palm. On his left cheek-bone there was a particularly large bruise; it looked as though someone had run a grater over it.

"How could I desert you, Comrade Senior Lieutenant?" he said, approaching the bed. "The m-moment I recognized you in the column I said to myself: now we're together! I won't move a step without my Battalion Commander!" He sat down beside the bed on a chest covered with a cheap brightly coloured cloth. "And so when it got dark I skipped!" he concluded, smiling his usual youthful smile.

Kostya was so glad to see his commander that what he had lived through in the previous twenty-four hours now seemed nothing more than a joke. As he told the story he kept laughing. So does the unpleasant past fade before the present, if the present is happy.

Loznevoi was no less glad to see Kostya. During the day spent lying in the Lopukhov house he had realized that living alone among strangers would be difficult. Now his orderly had unexpectedly appeared. He had not known Kostya long, no more than a week; yet Kostya was by no means a stranger. He felt this would mean a lot in their life together now. Besides, while he had been commander of the battalion, Kostya had been accustomed to obeying him implicitly and treating him with special attention and respect. And that still meant something. And so when Kostya finished the story of his escape, Loznevoi praised him unreservedly.

"Bravo, Kostya, bravo! Good man! Well, now that we're together it'll be easier. Remember the saying: a log by itself will go out in a stove, but two together will burn in a field. Right?"

"Your hearing come back already?" Kostya asked suddenly. "Qq-quite c-cured?"

Loznevoi was embarrassed. "Yes, Kostya," he answered in a low voice.

"That was pretty quick. I was all right at first, but then it got my t-tongue—"

"Kostya! Why, you're shaking like a leaf!"

"I'm frozen to death. It's cold outside."

Maryika entered the room. "Come near the stove," she ordered, "and warm up. You'll have plently of time to talk afterwards. Your feet are frozen stiff. Warm up, there'll be a samovar in a few minutes."

Kostya went over to the stove.

"I can't thank you enough for Kostya," Loznevoi said to Maryika. "It's very good that you brought him here."

Kostya came from the Kama River region. He had been in the army for about two years. Had it not been for the war he would have returned home that autumn. Quick, keen and efficient, he was an ideal orderly. All the officers in the battalion knew and loved him. In return for this love Kostya was ready to go through fire and water for them.

Like the rest of the men, Kostya did not like Loznevoi. But he had forced himself to respect Loznevoi. He was used to placing implicit faith in his commanders, carrying out their orders unconditionally, and looking always to their needs; if necessary, he was ready to give his life for them. To him this was what army discipline, with its stern justice, meant.

Kostya had had a bad time on the battlefield near the Vazuza. After the bombing he had started out for the first-aid post with Loznevoi, as Captain Ozerov had ordered. But as soon as they reached the nearby wood Loznevoi had told him to return to Battalion Headquarters. "I'll get there by myself," he said. When the tanks broke through, Kostya rushed into the forest to save his commander, but he could not find him. With tears in his eyes he had searched all the bushes and grassy gullies. The German sub-machine gunners captured him before he had a chance to fire.

Late that evening Loznevoi was also led into the deserted little village to which the prisoners had been herded. Kostya recognized him immediately despite the private's uniform. Kostya had not managed to get a word with his Battalion Commander during the whole march. But when the chance of escape offered itself in Olkhovka he had taken it without a second's thought, spurred on by the hope that he would find his commander, who had survived by a miracle, and that he would share his fate, whatever it might be, as his soldier's duty dictated. . . .

... The samovar came to the boil and Kostya was awakened for tea. He crawled out from behind the stove, his body heavy with warmth, and stared in surprise at the Battalion Commander. Loznevoi was sitting at the table, mirrored in the copper side of the steaming samovar. He wore a tobacco-coloured Russian shirt with a high neck, roomy black trousers, and rough, sturdy boots. His head and chin were already covered with an ashen-brown stubble. Now his greyish eyes shone in his lean face with a much softer light than usual. But he still smiled crookedly, with a faint twist of the left side of his face only.

"Don't you recognize me?"

"It's hard to," the confused Kostya admitted.

"Our host brought in a batch of clothing," Loznevoi said. He nodded at Erofei on the other side of the table. "Well, Father, again I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You're helping us out wonderfully. We'll be grateful the rest of our lives."

"Don't mention it. How could you go about in the things you had on before?"

Erofei rose and, turning to Kostya, pointed to the chest, on which lay a pair of old trousers patched at the knees, a faded blue skirt and an old pair of shoes.

"That's for you, young fellow," he said. "Put them on and think yourself lucky. Don't blame me because there's no boots; shoes are all I can spare."

Kostya sat down on the chest and picked up the shoes.

"I'll only t-take these," he replied, casting an unfriendly look at Erofei from his sound eye. "You can t-take all the rest back."

Erofei was offended. "You don't want it? Well, I haven't got anything better. Don't blame me for it. You know yourself what the times are like."

"I d-don't need anything. I've got my uniform. I'll wash it and wear it. I'm not s-supposed to give it up."

Loznevoi joined in the conversation. "Listen, Kostya, what do you think this is, the army?"

"Makes no difference," Kostya replied, addressing his commander stubbornly for the first time. "I can't give it up. It's become part of me."

"But how can you go about in uniform now? How will you manage?"

"We'll see."

Erofei gathered up the trousers and shirt and went off into the kitchen, slamming the door. Kostya started to put on the shoes. There was a minute's silence in the room. The samovar sang in a high, mournful key.

"You're making a mistake, Kostya," Loznevoi said. For an instant the cold, steely glitter came into his eyes again. "Our one aim now is to save ourselves, to keep alive. To do that we don't need an army uniform. It's gone out of fashion now about here. You've got to take it off, if you want to save your skin. And you should only thank our host instead of offending him. He's a touchy character, but now he's doing us a good turn."

"What's good about it!" Kostya objected again, without looking up. "That's n-not out of kindness. He's giving us clothes so we can g-go away from him sooner. Here are some clothes for you, and get out!—that's what he means. And as for the uniform—it's in fashion everywhere now."

"Only not here. If you want to stay alive, you've got to take it off."

Kostya stopped winding his right puttee, straightened up and looked at his former Battalion Commander. It was impossible to make out the expression on his swollen face, but his soft lips, always touched with a youthful warmth, twitched bitterly.

"C-comrade Senior Lieutenant!" he said, slightly raising his cracked voice.

"Listen, Kostya," Loznevoi interrupted, "I meant to

warn you straightaway: forget my rank. Understand? Forget it! And call me just by my name now."

"Just Loznevoi?" Kostya asked in surprise.

"No, I'm Zarubin now."

"What—you don't want your name either?"

"No. It's not necessary."

There was much they had to talk over that evening. But they drank their tea in silence, listening to the wail of the angry October wind and the heavy creaking of the birches beyond the window.

* VII *

During the night a thick layer of clouds blotted out the sky. The wind slackened, and a fine, penetrating rain began to fall. By morning it had made all the roads impassable and flooded the lowlands. Olkhovka was cut off from the rest of the world. The bleakest period of autumn had set in.

As for the villagers, they rarely went beyond their own yards; no one knew what his neighbour was thinking. There was no work done on the collective farm; the weather hindered everything. Besides, who was there to call the people out to work? Only one member of the management board was left in the village—Osip, and he was not feeling well and kept to his house. The sole occupant of the office now was Curly Yasha, a half-wit, who bore the quaint nickname of "deputy chairman." Only rarely did a chance visitor step into the office; the reek of home-grown tobacco that had always hung in the room completely disappeared.

Curly Yasha had been brought up by the village, and everybody loved him. Yasha had big affectionate eyes and dark thick curls. He was short and his body was slightly crooked, as if he were in the habit of edging through life sideways rather than facing up to its

difficulties. This disfigurement, however, was noticeable only upon close examination, so attractively did his affectionate eyes light up his face and so glossy were his dark curls.

Curly Yasha always rose early and called on his neighbours punctually, like a doctor. He would call at a house, have a smoke with the host on the threshold, pass on the news, and then go his way. Many of the villagers invited him in. Kind-hearted housewives would sit him down at table and treat him to a hot meal. Yasha ate little, was clean at table, and never accepted alms. In many of the houses his visits usually ended in talk about his marrying.

"Well, Yasha," the housewife would remark from her place by the stove, "when are you going to get married? I just can't wait to see the day!"

Yasha would shake his curls delightedly.

"Married?"

"Or haven't you found a bride yet? Why, there're plenty of brides!"

"He needs an educated one," the host would put in with a wink.

"What about the school teacher? She's the one," the hostess would respond at once. "Let him take her. Lovely girl!"

Yasha liked talking about marriage. He would wrinkle his eyes gallantly.

"Nina Dmitrievna!"

"Well, what's wrong with her?"

"She loves me. She said I'm curly and nice, so there! She said so herself!"

"If she loves you, then why waste time? Get married. She's a school teacher, and you're the 'deputy chairman' —not just anybody!"

Whenever Yasha was called "deputy chairman" he would spring up and grab his battered brief-case, a gift

from Stepan Boyarkin. "I've got to go," he would say with a worried frown.

And off he would go to the management office. He carried out the simple tasks Stepan Boyarkin gave him willingly, quickly and efficiently; when he was sent on an errand, he ran; when an extra pair of hands was needed for a job, he was always on the spot. All the morning his name was called out in the office, "Yasha! Yasha dear!"

When the morning's affairs were settled, Yasha would sit down at a free desk and start going through the contents of his brief-case. If the office was noisy at such times Stepan Boyarkin would occasionally raise his voice to call for quiet.

"Hey, you!" he would say in feigned anger. "Stop that noise! Can't you see when a man is working?"

At noon, when the collective farmers returned home from work to have their dinner and to rest, the general store opened up. Yasha would follow Serga Hakhai, the salesman, inside. Here, too, he found work to do. While Serga Hakhai light-heartedly clicked the counters of the abacus, took the money and joked with the girls, Yasha poured out kerosene and weighed salt. Many of the women customers would address Yasha instead of the salesman.

"Yasha, how about some salt?"

"Yasha dear, have you got any machine oil?"

"Yes, yes," Yasha would answer. "How much do you want?"

"Thanks, Yasha. Call in when you're passing, Yasha dear, I'll treat you to a glass of milk."

"And we've got fresh kvass. Drop in."

"I'll come, I'll come," Yasha would promise.

Yasha enjoyed working in the collective-farm office and the general store; he did it purely out of the goodness of his heart. The villagers were touched by this.

"A fine lad!" they said of him. "Worth his weight in gold!"

Now that the heads of the village had left, Curly Yasha, who really looked upon himself as Stepan Boyarkin's deputy, considered it his duty to be in the deserted office building all the time. Early in the morning he would stick his curly head out from the ledge above the big Russian stove on which he slept, and ask Ageyevna, the watchwoman, "How's the weather, eh?"

"Rain."

Yasha would be indignant. "Again no work! What a shame, eh?"

All day long he would examine various old collective-farm ledgers the book-keeper had left behind in the cupboard, rummage in the desk drawers, look through his scrawled note-books, and earnestly draw up what looked like lists and reports.

Occasionally the ailing storekeeper came in to see him, leaning heavily on his stick. He would sit down on a bench, stretch out his right leg, place his stick next to it, and start puffing away at a cigarette.

"How're things going, Comrade Deputy?" he would ask with a wry twist of his lips, sadly surveying Yasha bent over Stepan Boyarkin's desk.

Yasha would tear himself away from his papers. "Ah, it's Osip Mikhailovich! Coming along," he would reply gaily. "They're coming along all right."

"How about the threshing? Held up?"

"Look at the weather!"

"Oh, Yasha, Yasha!" Osip would sigh. "So this is what our life's come to, eh?"

After chatting with Yasha the storekeeper would leave, making more noise with his stick than before. Yasha, tired of fussing with the papers, would have dinner with the watchwoman and then begin to shape models of

cows and horses out of pitch. One day he had found a small barrel half full of pitch in the storeroom. Now he kept the barrel in the office, and when idle and bored frequently took to modelling. On one of the window-sills a herd of cows was grazing, and on another frolicked a herd of fat-bellied horses. But Yasha wanted his "collective farm" to have more and more stock. When he let out a new cow or horse to pasture he would look at it with shining eyes and shake his glossy curls in glee.

* VIII *

In the middle of the night something happened that roused the entire village. All of a sudden the dogs bestirred themselves and raised a mournful, nerve-racking howl. The villagers rushed to their windows. Out past the southern edge of the village a tongue of flame was surging skyward, showering the autumn darkness with sparks.

"The stacks are burning!"

People ran out of their houses and ploughed through the thick mud towards the fire. It was true: the threshing shed, which stood apart from the other farm buildings, and the unthreshed grain stacked round it, were burning. It was impossible to approach the shed; the whole roof was in flames, the stacks were throwing off a fierce heat and the wind was whipping dense clouds of white smoke round them. Everybody realized that the grain had been set on fire—and by somebody from the village. The people stood about for a long time, exclaiming sadly:

"The grain's lost!"

"It would have been lost anyway!"

"It might not have been."

"One of our folk set it on fire. Who else could it have been?"

Curly Yasha also came out to watch the fire. But he wore only a thin coat, and on the advice of the villagers Ageyevna took him home. There, as they warmed themselves by the stove, they mourned the loss of the grain.

"Oh, what a pity!" Yasha said, shaking his curly head.

"We sowed it and we harvested it," Ageyevna sobbed.

"One of our folk did it," Yasha explained, passing on what he had heard. "Who else could it have been?"

Just as they were about to lie down to sleep out the remainder of the night, something totally unexpected happened: the telephone in the corner where the bookkeeper had once sat rang sharply. They had forgotten all about the telephone—it had been silent for several days—and now this ring.

Ageyevna got into a fluster. "Dear me! What's that? Who can that be? In the middle of the night!"

"From the district centre!" Yasha exclaimed, rushing over to the phone.

Yasha had always looked forward to the ring of the telephone with impatience, especially when the bookkeeper was absent. The moment the telephone rang he would spring over to it, cautiously put the receiver to his ear, blow into the mouthpiece, and say importantly, "Yes, yes, Olkhovka! Yes, I'm listening! Who? Right away!"

"Is that you, Yasha?" the district chief would ask.

"It's me, me!" Yasha would reply, his face shining.

"Well, how are you getting on?"

"Fine, Comrade Chief."

"How are things in Olkhovka?"

"Coming along."

"Well, all right, Yasha, keep well," the district chief would say in conclusion. "Is Boyarkin there?"

"Yes, he's here!"

"Then give him the phone."

Yasha knew that night calls from the district centre were always about matters of special importance. Full of excitement, he put the receiver to his ear. He heard a firm, vibrating voice. At first he could not make out a single word, and he kept outshouting the distant voice with his usual, "Yes, yes, Olkhovka! Yes, I'm listening!"

Finally the voice became distinct. "Olkhoffka, yes?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Your fillage on fire is, yes?"

"Why the village? The stacks are burning!"

"Who? What tacks?"

"Stacks, stacks!"

The receiver was silent for a few seconds. The faint voices of two men talking near the telephone in Bolotnoye could be heard. Then the membrane began to vibrate again very loudly.

"Grain, yes?"

"Yes, yes, grain!"

"Who it on fire set?"

"One of our folk did it," Yasha replied. "Who else could it have been?"

"What you mean one of your folk? Your fillage?"

"Well, how can you tell? But everybody says it's one of us."

Again the receiver was silent for a few seconds. Yasha blew excitedly into the mouthpiece, and the membrane vibrated as it had before.

"Who are you?"

Yasha grinned from ear to ear.

"Me? The deputy chairman. Yes, the deputy chairman. The chairman's gone, but I'm here. . . ."

Ageyevna, who at first had been following the conversation from her place by the stove, moved closer to Yasha; a tense, worried expression had come over her wrinkled face. Suddenly she strode up to Yasha,

snatched the receiver from his hand and pushed him away without saying a word. She hastily brushed a strand of hair back from her ear and put the receiver to it.

"He's no deputy!" she shouted into the phone at the top of her voice, as though she were talking to a neighbour across the yard. "Deputy! Lord, he's a half-wit, why do you listen to him?"

She took a breath and then dropped her voice a little. "Who's that speaking? What do you want, eh?"

The next instant she fell back against the wall and the hand holding the receiver dropped limply to her side. "Holy Mother of God, it's them!"

Flinging the receiver down on the rest, Ober-Lieutenant Gobelmann, the recently appointed Commandant in the district centre of Bolotnoye, stood up over the desk, on which lay a large coloured map. A short man in a brand-new uniform, he had a hard-bitten face that now wore a disturbed expression. He shook back the dark tuft of hair that had fallen over his broad forehead and brought his fist down on the map with restrained force.

"The deffil! What you say?"

A few feet away, to the left of the desk, stood an elderly seedy-looking individual with a bright pink bald spot on the top of his head; he was dressed in a cheap, crumpled suit. In his trembling fingers he held a pencil and a dog-eared note-book.

"They're burning it!" he replied hastily with a quick shrug of his bony shoulders. "That's the instructions from Moscow—from Stalin himself. I don't remember the date. Everywhere now they're burning what they didn't have time to burn when they retreated. They're dooming us all to starvation!"

"How far is it to Olkhoffka?"

The bald-headed man with the note-book sighed. "Oh, Herr Ober-Lieutenant, that's such a godforsaken place! About twenty miles. It stands on a hill, and that's why we can see the fire so well. But I don't suppose you can reach the village now. The bridges are wrecked—by the Red Army, of course. Mud and marsh! It's the most godforsaken place you could imagine. And the people there are all so ignorant."

"All right," said the Commandant. "You may go."

When the bald-headed man had minced out of the room, Gobelmann resumed his wicker armchair and began to speak in German. "A distasteful character, Herr Doctor, isn't he?"

At the desk to Gobelmann's right, also in a plain wicker armchair, sat a lean man in the uniform of an army surgeon, with a small snake-like head perched on a long neck. High up on his bony nose were perched pince-nez with rectangular lenses and a gold-plated spring with rubber clamps that dug into his flesh; a fine chain ran from the right lens to his ear. This was Doctor Rhöde.

"Yes, indeed!" Rhöde answered without changing his pose. "I have been observing him. He is a typical representative of a nation destined by Fate itself to extinction. Yes, he is a slave—and for that he was created." He drew his fountain pen out of his pocket with a lazy gesture. "At every step I have to make notes for my book."

"Have you much material already, Doctor?"

"Yes, indeed!" Rhöde passed his tongue over his thin dry lips. "But more is needed. It is for that purpose, Herr Ober-Lieutenant, that I am making a stay here. As you probably know, Russian tribes settled in this region a very long time ago. Here we have the genuine Rus,

as it was formerly called. Have you noticed how wild and quiet it is all round here?"

"But there are fires here, too," Gobelmann protested guardedly. "Take that lonely village of Olkhovka. Do you know what's happening there? The Soviet authorities are still there!"

Rhöde jerked his head back. "Oh!"

"Yes, yes! Just now I was talking to that—that deputy chairman of the collective farm. You see what happens? It's extremely difficult, Doctor, to assimilate these areas! And you yourself know the tasks set us in this war."

"Not all at once, not all at once, my dear fellow," Rhöde said encouragingly. "Who of you will go to that village where the fire is?"

Gobelmann reflected, rubbing his fingers over his smoothly shaven chin.

"Lieutenant Kweiss, I suppose," he replied. "So far there's nobody else. Would you like to visit that out-of-the-way Russian village with him, Doctor? He will set out soon. I imagine you will be able to find unique material for your book there."

"Yes, I will think it over," Rhöde answered, after a pause. "I may go, but not for long. You know, I am in a hurry to get to Moscow, don't you? I want to see the parade of our army with my own eyes. That should be an extraordinary historical spectacle!"

Gobelmann sighed. "I envy you," he said. "They say the parade has been fixed for the Seventh of November."

"Yes. Do you realize how symbolic that is?"

A minute later Lieutenant Kweiss stood in front of the Commandant's table. He was a tall, portly man with a broad womanish backside over which his trousers and the bottom of his uniform tunic stretched tight. He wore light-tan hobnailed boots. His head grew right out of his shoulders; at the temples it was quite bald, and on

top there was a tuft that looked like a coxcomb. It was difficult to make out the expression of his bloated, almost browless face with its small, greyish eyes.

"Kweiss, tomorrow you will receive full instructions," Gobelmann said. "When you have finished up in the villages already indicated you will visit Olkhovka as well. If you cannot reach it by car you will go on horseback. For a certain period, until further instructions, Olkhovka will be your residence."

Kweiss put two fingers to his temple. "Yes, Herr Ober-Lieutenant!"

"That village is here. Look—" Gobelmann bent over the map.

* IX *

When the villagers began to return from the fire Ageyevna ran out on the steps and called several women over. She told them about the conversation with the Germans. Despite the late hour this news quickly spread through the village. People rushed to the management office, calling anxiously to one another in the darkness as they splashed through the mud and the puddles.

The women who came to the office showered Curly Yasha with questions. He sat at Stepan Boyarkin's desk and, believing he was fulfilling his duty as deputy chairman, kept squinting with pleasure at the lamp. Yasha's weak mind and memory prevented him from giving a coherent account of his conversation with the Germans. Although aware of his failings, the frightened women asked him questions, and Yasha answered them. Out of the goodness of his heart and a desire to please, he gave affirmative answers to almost all the questions.

"Yasha dear, what did he do—swear?"

"He did," Yasha replied with a smile.

"Did he ask who set it on fire?"

"Uh-huh, he did that."
"And did he threaten, Yasha?"
"Did he threaten! I should say he did!"
"He said they'd come soon? Did he?"
"Yes, yes, that's right."
"I'll show them—is that what he said? Yes?"
"Uh-huh, I'll show them!"
"Oh dear, women, we are in trouble!"
Now Ageyevna, who had garbled the story from the start, herself began to believe that the conversation had taken place in just that way. "That's right, women," she confirmed readily. "It's all true."
After a few minutes spent talking to Curly Yasha the women worked themselves up into a real panic.
"Now they'll come down on us, women!"
"They'll give it to us all for that grain!"
"What shall we do? What shall we do?"
Just then Erofei walked in. He looked worried, and his gaze was dark.
"There's nothing to moan about," he said, sitting down on a stool near the stove. "What will be will be. If they don't come tomorrow, they'll come the day after. There'll be a row over those stacks and they'll pick us clean. What's the sense of waiting for that? There's the seed lying in the granary. They'll drive up and load it. And then there's the horses and machines in the yard. . . ."
Voices rose from the crowd of women:
"What shall we do, Erofei Kuzmich?"
"What shall we do? Why not divide everything up. . . ."
A hush fell over the room.
"Well, what else is there to do?" Erofei went on, although nobody had objected to his proposal to divide up the grain. "They're the strong ones now. Divide up—and that's that! And when they come they can search us high and low but they won't find a thing. Am I right?"

The women stood round in silence, their heads lowered.

"Why don't you say something?"

"But how shall we sow in the spring?" Ulyana Shutyaeva asked for all of them. "Each on his own?"

"Anything might happen. . . ."

"Won't our army really come back?"

Without waiting for Erofei's reply Panya Goryunova, the young soldier's wife, broke the silence with a sob. The other women pressed close to one another and began to cry too.

"Damn it, what a weepy tribe!" Erofei rose. "Now they're off! Well, wail away if you want to. But tomorrow morning we have to settle the matter." He walked out, slamming the door.

All night long the villagers talked about what to do, sighing and sobbing. They reflected about many things, about all that had happened in recent years.

They recalled the time when the collective farm was founded, and how hard it had been for them to give up the customs of centuries, how terrifying to take that step into the unknown. They recalled the difficult early years of life in the collective farm, difficult and unusual years, when this and that and the next thing had gone wrong, and how they had suffered because things were going wrong, how they had sighed for the life of individual farming, when everything, it seemed, had been easier and freer. But when had all that been? A long, long time ago.

In recent years the collective farm had been getting on well. They had erected strong and roomy outbuildings, bought various farm machinery, raised fair-sized herds, laid out a large orchard and vegetable garden, learned to grow big harvests, and, most important of all, they had learned to work together without getting in one another's way, each contributing his skill to the

common effort. Everyone had begun to live fairly comfortably. True, a man always wants more than he has, and the people of Olkhovka also dreamed of better times. But now they knew that with the collective farm their dreams were feasible. They all realized that the most difficult period lay behind them, that once the farm was on the upgrade, things would keep on improving from year to year, just as a tree, once it has taken firm root, spreads its branches farther and farther with each passing year.

And now everything was crumbling because of some alien and evil will. It was awful to think of. They dearly loved what they had built up and become accustomed to during the ten years; everything connected with the collective farm had become firmly rooted in their hearts, and if torn out there would be blood....

* X *

The morning broke cold and windy. The eastern half of the sky had cleared, but the west was ominously dark. The pigeons sat on the attic window-sills ruffling their feathers. They looked about them in surprise at the changes the period of bad weather had worked in the village: the bare branches of the birches swayed wearily and hopelessly, and the sky was so uninviting that a bird did not even feel like raising its wing.

The villagers began to assemble in the yard of the collective farm on the southern outskirts of Olkhovka. Here stood a roomy stable built on a rough-stone foundation, near it were the barn, and the cart and harness sheds, and to the side an airy, well-lighted cowshed with a wooden roof, and a sturdy sheep-pen; on the other side of the yard stood a smithy and a machine shed, and farther off, granaries. By the gate there was an old hut, in which the team leaders used to hand out the day's

jobs of a morning and where those who worked permanently in the yard used to gather in the evenings to warm up and chat.

The yard, always a noisy, bustling place, was now deserted. Few horses were left. All the collective-farm livestock had been driven off to the east. Two old grooms wandered aimlessly about the yard.

The villagers gathered in the hut. They talked in low voices about the weather and the war.

Erofei deliberately came late; he did not want to leave himself open to the accusation that he was the most active agitator for dividing up. As he turned the corner of the lane leading to the yard he caught sight of Efim Chernyavkin. At the beginning of the war Efim Chernyavkin had been called up to the army, but he had deserted from his unit during the retreat and come back home. Until today he had kept in hiding, although many knew already that he was at home.

Erofei waited for him to come up. "Well, crawled out?"

Chernyavkin made a mock bow and pushed his cap on to the back of his head. He was in an old work jacket and broken boots. His chin was covered with black stubble.

"It's about time, Erofei," he replied amicably. "If I sat there any longer I reckon they'd grab everything here."

"Thinking of staying then?"

"Yes, there's a hope."

"What's the beard for?"

"I'll start shaving again soon. . . ."

Several women came up.

"What a war!" Erofei heaved a loud sigh. "They ran away—scattered to their homes and their women! Of course the Germans'll come! Soldiers, bah! Think of my son, he even passed through here—everybody knows

it—but you didn't catch him staying! Off he went!" he lifted his head proudly. "He went off to fight, once it had to be done. And now, they say he's been killed. . . ."

At the recollection of Andrei, he became genuinely upset. His face twisted in pain.

"If they all fought like that, it'd be a different story! But do they! Everybody thinks only about himself. . . ."

"What kind of a war is this?" Chernyavkin muttered. "The minute they hit us everybody ran! What do you expect us to do—fight tanks with clubs?"

The women standing round looked contemptuously at Efim Chernyavkin.

"And so you made straight for the bushes?" Lukeria Boyarkina shouted at him.

"Our brave defender!" Ulyana Shutyaeva exclaimed scornfully. "You think my husband didn't have to face tanks too? Why didn't *he* run away?"

"We'll see—mebbe he'll come running in yet," Chernyavkin muttered in reply, casting a bleary eye over the women; before appearing in public he had taken a drink to bolster up his courage.

"No, he won't!" Ulyana raised her voice still higher. "He's not that kind! And even if he did, I'm not like your fine beauty: I wouldn't let him into the house! God forbid! You'll never find me going to bed with a man like you!"

"What are you cackling about?" Chernyavkin snapped back.

"Wha-at? Why, you rotten worm!" cried Anfissa. "And you have the nerve to talk!" She spat in disgust. "By God, women, I can't even bear the sight of him. Let's go, women!"

Erofei squeezed into the hut and sat down unobtrusively on a bench near the door. It was growing quiet in the room; the weather and the war had already been exhausted as a subject of conversation.

"Who else are we waiting for?" a woman suddenly spoke up from the stove in a strong clear voice. "Let's get started!"

"Yes, everyone seems to be here."

"Where's Erofei Kuzmich? Has he come?"

"There he is, near the door."

"Well, Erofei Kuzmich," Chernyavkin said, "who else should we wait for? You do the talking."

Erofei stood up. "You're queer people," he said with a shake of his thick beard. "Who am I to start? I'm nobody—you know that yourself. I'm just a rank-and-filer."

Voices called out:

"We're all rank-and-filers."

"But somebody has to begin."

"Now everybody's going to point to everybody else."

"Go ahead and start."

The outer door opened with a creak and Curly Yasha appeared on the threshold, his brief-case under his arm. His affectionate eyes glowed with pleasure.

"Why should I begin?" Erofei said. "Here's the 'deputy chairman' himself."

"A meeting?" Yasha asked joyfully.

"Everybody's here," Erofei replied with mock respect. "We were just waiting for you. Will you make the opening speech?"

Chernyavkin guffawed.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, making fun of him," Anfissa said sternly.

The gathering fell silent. Grandpa Silanty gave a cough. Lifting his shoulders above the crowd and almost touching the low ceiling with his hat, he turned to the door, his weak eyes searching for Erofei. "Begin, Erofei. Why don't you? Seeing it's a matter like this—"

"But I don't know how," Erofei said. Then clearing his throat, he made his way forward. The people moved

aside to let him pass. "I really don't know," he repeated. When he reached the desk he took off his hat and began to twist it in his hands. "It makes me feel terrible. We worked and built up the farm and grew prosperous, and now look—it's all going to pieces. Isn't that so?"

Many lowered their heads.

"Erofei Kuzmich, don't drag it out," someone said quietly.

Erofei sighed. "Well, I never went against the community. Now that such a calamity has struck us, we have to remake our lives. So we'll get down to business, shall we?"

At that moment someone remembered the collective-farm storekeeper. "Where's Osip Mikhailovich?"

"He hasn't been here at all."

"Fancy forgetting him!"

"Yasha dear, run over and call Osip. Where is he?"

"Yasha, where are you?"

To everyone's surprise, however, Yasha was also missing. In the crowd no one had noticed him slip away. Several people ran off to look for Osip.

In a short while a voice came from the door, "He's in the stable."

"What's he doing there?" Erofei asked.

"Crying."

The villagers poured out into the yard in a body. Osip emerged from the stable, leaning heavily on his stick. After him came Curly Yasha, pale and frightened, the brief-case still under his arm. He stopped in the doorway. Osip continued to walk forward.

"Well?" he asked hoarsely, looking at Erofei unashamed of his tears. "Want to go back to farming on your own? Your guts not strong enough?"

Erofei took a step towards Osip. "That's not the point—"

"Then what is?" Through his tears Osip's gaze was bold and irreconcilable.

"You don't know? Look at what the Germans are doing! In broad daylight! They'll take away all the grain and burn our houses down. Should we wait for that?"

"If they take it they'll answer for it," Osip rasped. "But why should we take it all? And how can we lift our hands against that property?" He pointed to the stables and the cart and machine sheds. "What part of this is your own, Erofei Kuzmich? What did you build up, eh? Can you remember? Where's yours, Chernyavkin? Where's yours—what's your name?—where's yours, Fetinya? Everything here is common property! Common!" he exclaimed, thrusting his chin out and opening his eyes wide. "How can you tear it to pieces? Better tear my heart out! Here, tear it out!" He stepped toward the crowd. "Tear it out, but while I'm alive I won't let you get at the property and I won't give up the keys to the granaries!"

The villagers stood about silent and still. A stab went through Erofei's heart: it was a bad silence.

"Aha, so that's it!" Suddenly his face turned livid. He took a big step towards the storekeeper. "Who are you saving it for?" he ground out through clenched teeth. "For the Germans? So that when they come you can say, 'here, take it'? Is that it?"

Osip's lame leg gave a violent twitch. He rocked back and almost dropped his stick. Pale and confused, he looked angrily from under his bushy brows into Erofei's piercing eyes.

"So that's what you're like, eh?" he said hoarsely, twisting his lips with aversion. "Worm-eaten trash?"

"You leave me alone!" Erofei blustered.

Osip pulled the keys out of his pocket and flung them furiously at Erofei's feet. Then, lunging forward with his stick, he limped jerkily in the direction of the stable.

Erofei picked up the keys with a trembling hand. He turned to the crowd. "Well, shall we start dividing up?"

"Go ahead, don't drag it out," Chernyavkin urged.

Anfissa, who all this time had been observing her kinsman in silence, stepped out of the crowd with a man's stride. Her energetic face was calm and severe, and her dark, still youthful eyes shone with a strong and steady light. Erofei knew that of late she had become the leader among the women. His heart missed a beat.

"You shouldn't have hurt Osip Mikhailovich like that, kinsman," Anfissa said in a low but firm voice. "No one will believe that he's saving our property for the Germans. He's put his life-blood into everything you see here in the yard. How could he give it away? Come now, hand those keys over."

Erofei handed the keys over in confusion.

"Osip Mikhailovich!" Anfissa called out. "Come back! Take the keys!"

Thrusting his stick into the mud, the storekeeper obediently started back.

"There won't be any dividing up, kinsman," Anfissa said brusquely, jangling the keys. "Forget that word." Her eyes sparkled with a clear, youthful light. "Forget it! Our arms will wither away if we start to divide up. We can't tear to pieces what's been built up by our common toil. Am I right, women?"

The response was immediate:

"That's right, Anfissa Markovna, that's right."

"We don't want to, and that's all there is to it!"

"The idea! Dividing up!"

Osip came up. Anfissa stepped forward to meet him. "Take the keys," she said.

Erofei tossed his beard in the wind. "So the property will go to ruin, kinswoman?"

"Why?"

"Do you think it'll stay untouched?"

"Here it won't," Anfissa agreed. "If it's left in the yard it'll all be lost. Especially the seed."

"That's just what I'm saying."

"No, it isn't," Anfissa objected firmly. "We can't leave anything in the yard. We have to distribute it out among everybody for safekeeping this very day. That's the way to do it. Each one of us will hide and save what he can, and when our army returns we'll bring it back here again. For safekeeping only! And everybody will sign receipts for it. Am I right, women?"

There was a stir in the crowd. Voices were raised in approval.

"Now that makes sense!" boomed Grandpa Silanty, straightening up out of the crowd.

"What d'you mean, receipts?" Chernyavkin said, baring his teeth. "Who'll we give them to? Osip? Let's divide up and put an end to it."

"Don't you shout, you rotten deserter!" Anfissa said, advancing on him. "Popped out like a pimple, have you? Come here to grab the property? How much work did you put into it?"

"I'll take my share. Give me my share, and that's all I ask."

"You won't get a thing!"

"Is that so?" Chernyavkin shouted drunkedly. "Do you want me to show you? Do you?

Erofei caught him by the sleeve. "Wait a minute, Efim. You're not as drunk as all that. What are you shouting about?"

Keeping Chernyavkin back with his shoulder, Erofei turned to the women. He saw that nothing would come of his proposal to divide up, and already regretted his hotheadedness. Having failed, he had to cover up his tracks.

"Now, women, why did I talk about dividing up?" he began peacefully, although he could scarcely restrain his anger against Anfissa. "Because here in the yard

everything will be lost. But if it's for safekeeping, that's even better. We'll take charge of it, and then we'll see. It won't take long to bring it back when our army returns, will it? But you see, I couldn't work that out myself." Here he threw a bit of flattery at his kinswoman. "You've got a fine head on your shoulders, kinswoman. Well, time doesn't wait. Let's get started. We've argued it out, so now let's get down to business. Come on, women."

Much relieved, everybody followed Erofei back to the hut. Osip limped along in the rear, jangling his keys. Thinking about Anfissa, he whispered to himself, "My goodness, but she's strong! Yes, really strong!"

* XI *

Trees change in different ways in autumn. Some retain their colour for a long time. The sun's rays lose their warmth, the winds rage and frosts grip the earth, yet the leaves live on stubbornly, without changing their rich summer green. With other trees it is different. No sooner does autumn bring its harsh weather than almost before you notice it their leaves have turned yellow and come fluttering to the ground.

And so it was with Maryika.

After she learned of Andrei's death an immediate change, both outward and inward, took place in her. Until then she had still seemed just a girl. She had bustled about the house, always performing her duties with skill and cheerful impishness. Now all that was as if it had never been. She had become a woman, and although she was still very young, she had the quiet reserve that comes to women, especially when assailed by grief. She moved about slowly and spoke in a low voice. Her full lips and black eyes stood out even more sharply in her pale face.

She had once been strongly attached to Andrei's home. Everything about it had become dear to her: the house itself, with its sky-blue shutters, the big yard over which the pigeons circled, the glowing silver birches, the pale asters in the little front garden.... But now she was quickly developing an antipathy for all this.

Maryika knew that the reason for this antipathy was not that Andrei had been killed and that without him she was becoming an unwanted stranger in the house. It had all begun with that trip to the battlefield with her father-in-law. She could not bear to talk to him now and every day she felt more and more out of place in the Lopukhov house. This feeling established a bond between her and the others who were also strangers in the Lopukhov house—Loznevoi and Kostya. She frequently sat with them in the best room, talking, as people do when they are sad, about trivial things.

Loznevoi, however, interpreted this in his own way. "Life is taking its course," he thought. "She'll grieve a little more, and then youth will claim its own...." This thought fired him. Every day he became more talkative with Maryika and persistently sought an opportunity to be alone with her.

* XII *

At noon Erofei drove up with several sacks of seed grain. His wife met him in the yard. Wrapping her shawl tighter and gathering round her the folds of her worn old jacket, she padded slowly over to the cart.

"Is there much?" she asked.

"Everything you see here," Erofei answered roughly, tethering the horse. "I had all I could do to get even that. That kinswoman of ours, damn her liver, can do anything she wants with the women, and they follow her

like sheep. Damn that devil's tribe! She didn't let us divide up. And those women—they used to moan enough to make you deaf. But now they seem to have gone crazy; they've dug into that collective farm like ticks and you can't tear them away from it. That's what your kind is like!"

Alevtina heaved a soft sigh.

"Well, all right, to hell with them!" Erofei walked up to the cart and felt one of the sacks. "Now we have seed. At least my mind's at ease. Only we have to hide it well. They may come any day now. Where's Maryika?"

"At home. Where did you expect?"

"With them again, I suppose?"

"They're playing cards."

"Ha, so she's playing already!" Erofei exclaimed maliciously. "Too soon! It's her damned family! She'll take after her mother. And tell me, if you don't mind, why does she hang around with those good-for-nothings, eh?"

Alevtina waved her hand feebly at her husband.

"Don't make a fuss again! Do you want her to sit by herself and pine away? She's changed enough as it is. It takes her mind off things a bit."

"Takes her mind off things! There's work to be done! She's stopped doing anything at all, and you are siding with her!"

"What is there special for her to do?"

"Huh, have I got to explain everything to you too? We've got to dig a pit, that's what!"

When she heard her father-in-law in the house, Maryika scooped up the cards from the table and walked over to the window. Erofei threw open the door of the best room and said, without entering:

"You ought to come out and help! Or didn't you know I was back? There's so much work to do I haven't got a chance to breathe. We've got to dig a pit for the seed,

and I've still got to make another trip to the yard. I'm run off my feet!"

Without saying a word to her father-in-law Maryika took her shawl and walked out of the room. At the same moment Loznevoi rose from the table. He treated his host with marked respect and strove to please him in every possible way.

"Look here, Erofei Kuzmich," he said, coming to the door, "is there anything we can do to help you? Did you say something about digging a pit?"

"Yes," grunted Erofei.

"What else?"

"Well, there's boards to be sawn for it. . . ."

"We'll do that, Erofei Kuzmich," Loznevoi promised. "Get ready, Kostya. I feel all right now, and it's time we did some work in the fresh air. All you have to do, Erofei Kuzmich, is show us where to dig and which boards to use."

"So you feel better?"

"I'm all right now."

"Well, thank God!"

"I'm ready," Kostya said. "We're used to d-digging. We've done plenty of it this year. It doesn't pay to get out of the habit; we may have to do some more yet."

They went out into the yard and quickly carried the sacks of grain to the barn. Erofei showed them where to dig inside the shed and the boards that had to be sawn to line the pit. Then he took Vasya and went off to the collective-farm yard again, this time to receive implements for safekeeping.

"What a grabber!" Kostya shook his head. "He rakes in everything he c-can lay hands on. Give a man like him a free hand and he'll swell up in a minute, like a s-spider."

"Stop pitching into our host!" Loznevoi said irritably.

"I'm not pitching into him—but I ought to."

"Chuck it. I'm fed up!"

Kostya was silent for a while. Then he said to Maryika, "You go on home. There's only one spade, and there's only room for one person to dig anyway."

"Then look," Loznevoi said, "you dig and she and I will go and saw the boards. Where's the saw?"

A north wind blowing since early morning had dispersed the blanket of fog hanging over the drab, muddy earth, and a pale sun had come out. After several days of bad weather, visibility had increased; the summits of low hills, the tops of fir forests, and clumps of trees in the fields, spotted with dull gold, came into view again. It was as if the countryside were emerging from oblivion, showing a few faint traces of its former beauty and no hint of regeneration—emerging to warm itself a little in the sun.

Loznevoi was overjoyed at this first opportunity to be alone with Maryika for some time. He dragged the boards to the saw-horse in the corner of the yard, and eagerly got down to work. He sawed jerkily and crookedly, however, breathing hard through his thin nostrils. His lean face with its little Tartar beard quickly began to perspire.

"Better take a rest," Maryika soon suggested.

Leaning on the saw-horse, he looked into Maryika's face.

"You know, Maryika," he said significantly, "there's a splendid saying in the Koran: 'Everything that is going to happen to you is written down in the Book of Life, and the wind of eternity turns the pages at random.' And so the wind is turning the pages of my life. Turning them fast." He lowered his head. "Do you remember how you wished me good luck?"

"I did, but it hasn't come to you."

"Why not?" Loznevoi objected. "After all, I wasn't killed, and I might have been. Besides, sometimes what seems a failure can turn out to be a big success later on. Remember the little talk we had by the stream? I think that was also written down on one of the pages in my Book of Life. The wind turned a couple of pages, I landed in Olkhovka, and you rescued me—"

Maryika rattled the saw and interrupted him. "Let's get down to work."

But Loznevoi continued. "If I could only know what comes later in that book." His left cheek twisted into a smile. "Do you know, Maryika?"

"Start sawing! I don't even know anything about myself."

As yet Maryika had no idea what Loznevoi was driving at, but something put her on her guard. Without looking at him she began to press hard on the saw and pull it sharply, sprinkling sawdust on the hem of her skirt. Every time she turned her head Loznevoi caught the dark flash of her eyes under their lowered lashes.

Stricken with grief, Maryika had not paid much attention to Loznevoi and had had no inkling of his feelings for her. Now she guessed, and this filled her with distaste for him and with a vague uneasiness.

They sawed two boards in silence. When Loznevoi had put the third on the saw-horse it occurred to him that Erofei might soon return and he started to talk again, almost in a whisper, "Listen, Maryika ... why did you rescue me?"

"Go to hell!" Maryika suddenly shouted. She threw down the saw and ran into the vegetable garden.

Maryika stood by the mountain ash a long time, trying to understand why the conversation with Loznevoi had upset her so, and striving to put her finger on the disturbing thoughts that kept flitting by elusively, like spider threads in the sunshine....

* XIII *

In the evening Maryika went to see her mother. Anfissa looked at her closely and was struck: how she had changed in the past few days! She sat down beside her and pressed her cheek to her daughter's shoulder.

"Why, dear, you're just a shadow."

"You know, Mother," Maryika began, straightening the shawl on her shoulders—for some reason she wore it often now, although she was not afraid of the cold. "You know that Loznevoi said he saw Andrei dying under a fir-tree, and I myself saw how many men had been killed there. . . ." She gazed sadly into the dim far corner of the room. "But why doesn't my heart tell me he's dead? When I sit quiet and listen to it, it doesn't say so. He said Andrei was very close to death. But did he die? You know yourself what Andrei is like. He could have fought down death and crawled away. . . ."

Anfissa rose.

"We'll have to see what the beans say, dear."

"Will it be true?"

"Why, dear, it will all be as true as can be! Faya, get me the beans."

Faya ran to the cupboard in the corner. "Just wait, Maryika, you'll see for yourself!"

"To tell the truth, that's what I came for," Maryika confessed. "I never used to believe in it, but now I keep thinking that perhaps they really are right."

Life was difficult in those days. The war had taken away many husbands, brothers and sons. Everybody knew that their loved ones walked daily in the shadow of death, and nobody ever received any word from them. That autumn many visited the fortune-tellers, about whom they had completely forgotten in recent years.

In Olkhovka a crabbed old woman named Zubachikha had begun to tell fortunes some time ago, in the sum-

mer. She told extremely gloomy fortunes, usually prophesying bad things, and made everybody cry. But recently, to everybody's surprise, Anfissa had begun to tell fortunes with beans. Her prophecies were always cheerful. The women quickly turned from Zubachikha to Anfissa and began to gather round her even more willingly than before. Anfissa foretold a quick end to the war, the return of relatives in complete health, changes for the better in life—in a word everything the women dreamed about, and hence they placed utter faith in her fortune-telling.

Anfissa sat down at the table and scattered a handful of vari-coloured beans over the cloth. Smoothing her dark hair and compressing her lips, she at once assumed a stern, concentrated expression. Her daughters sat quietly on either side of her. The flame flickered in the small open lamp. It was dusky in the room. Outside the wind was blowing in noisy gusts and the shutters were creaking.

"Wish," Anfissa said, moving one of the beans towards her daughter.

Maryika closed her hand round the bean and sighed. "I've made my wish long ago."

"Put it down here."

There was a knock on the door. Lukeria Boyarkina came in. "Oh, I'm in time!" she exclaimed from the doorway the minute she saw that Anfissa was telling fortunes. "I put the children to sleep and came straight over. Anfissa, tell me why my heart's been aching all day long. It aches and aches, and everywhere I go I think about Stepan. I feel as if something's going to happen."

"But I told you your fortune the day before yesterday," Anfissa said, shuffling the beans.

"What of it? That was two days ago."

"Then sit down and wait a moment."

Lukeria sat down next to Maryika. "She'll tell you everything—the honest truth!" she whispered into her ear.

"Hush, I've started," Anfissa said.

First she divided the beans into three heaps, and then each of them into three again; now there were two, three or four beans in each. She gazed at the beans sternly, knitting her brows, as though striving to make out what they foretold. Before she had a chance to utter a word her faithful assistant in the fortune-telling, the black-eyed Faya, jumped up and shouted, "He's alive! Maryika, he's alive!"

Maryika cast a burning glance at her companions. "Alive?"

"Yes, he's alive, alive!" Faya insisted.

"Can't you see?" her mother said sternly. "Look—here he is!" She pointed her finger at one of the heaps of beans. "He's alive. And he's on the road. Here's the road." She pointed to another heap of beans. "Well, there's no need to hide the truth, he isn't having an easy time of it. He's worried—worried about home. Here, look."

"That's nothing," Maryika said in a barely audible voice. "If only he's alive."

Shading her eyes from the light with her hand, she stared into the corner of the room, where a cricket also seemed to be chanting, "Alive, alive." "Andrei," she thought. "My darling, light of my life."

"Now tell mine too," Lukeria begged. "I just can't wait. Find out if he's alive and if he'll come back."

"Why bother with fortune-telling?" a man's voice suddenly came from the top of the stove. "He'll soon come back."

Maryika and Lukeria froze in fright at the table. Anfissa turned to the stove. "So you couldn't wait, you frozen carrot? Warmed up and come to life? Well,

climb down, everybody here is all right." To Lukeria and Maryika she explained, "That's Serga Hakhai. Didn't you recognize his voice?"

Serga Hakhai, in a dirty undershirt and crumpled trousers smeared with brick dust climbed down from the ledge above the stove, holding a blue silk tobacco pouch. Anfissa handed him his felt boots. "I wouldn't have spoken up," he said as he put them on, "only I wanted a smoke. I've been sniffing at the pouch a long time now."

"Serga, Serga!" Lukeria cried, barely able to collect herself. "Where have you come from? Where's my husband?"

"Wait a minute, let me light up."

"Tell me, tell me!"

"You had your fortune told, didn't you?" Serga grinned, his wall-eye flashing.

"Well, what if I did?"

"What did the beans tell you?"

"They said he's alive, but they don't say where he is."

"Clever beans," Serga remarked, walking up to the table. "They know all about military security. I'll tell you the same thing: he's alive, and he sends you his love. But where he is I won't say, even though you're his wife."

He winked mischievously at the women and, bending his straw-coloured forelock over the table, brought the end of his cigarette to the flame of the little lamp.

* XIV *

Loznevoi was chopping dry stalks of home-grown tobacco on a board on the table, while Kostya sifted it. Erofei had excellent tobacco; it was famous all over the village. The invisible dust tickled the men's nostrils.

Kostya wrinkled his nose. "It certainly has a bite! Takes after its owner, and no mistake!" Nowadays he stammered less. "What about trying some of the fresh stuff?"

"Let's."

They lit up. It was early morning. The Lopukhovs were busy out in the yard. Inside the house it was quiet.

Kostya burst out coughing and clutched at his chest. "Gosh! Why, it just scrapes away at your guts. What d-damned stuff. Just like its owner, by God!"

"Why do you keep pitching into him all the time?" Loznevoi asked. "All peasants are like that."

"Take me—I'm a peasant. From the loneliest village you could find. Am I like that?"

"No, but you will be."

"Never. I'm not that kind."

Loznevoi puffed leisurely at his cigarette. "What don't you like about our host? He feeds us. What have you got against him?"

"Everything, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

"Forget that rank," Loznevoi said irritably. "How many times have I told you?"

"It keeps slipping my mind," Kostya said in confusion. "I've got used to it."

The habits of army life clung firmly to Kostya. He rose early, neatly made his bed, kept his uniform tidy, wore his belt tight, polished his shoes and shaved frequently, although only a scanty fuzz grew on his boyish cheeks. It was as though he considered himself still in the service and obliged to carry out its regulations to the letter. The swelling on his face had subsided and his right eye had opened again, although the skin all round it was discoloured. He seemed to mature from day to day; less and less frequently did his face break into that artless youthful smile.

"What don't you like about him?" Loznevoi repeated.

"Everything!" Kostya replied with unexpected sharpness. "There's a kind of grass in the fields—sow-thistle. Ever seen it? If you plough and harrow a field properly there's never a sign of it. But just stop t-taking care of the field and out it p-pops. Where it gets its strength is beyond me. It spreads and spreads until it chokes everything."

"And Erofei Kuzmich is like that?"

"Exactly! Like that sow-thistle!"

Loznevoi stood up, pulled his shirt straight and picked up the knife again. He was about to resume cutting the tobacco but stopped and cast an angry glance at Kostya.

"Have you seen any other peasants lately? In the places where there's no more Soviet power? If you had you wouldn't talk like that about Erofei Kuzmich. They're all like that, those peasants, all of them!"

Kostya gave a smile that was almost defiant.

"Have you seen them lately yourself? How do you know they're like that?" Kostya was beginning to argue more and more boldly with his former Battalion Commander. "How do you know?"

"I know them!" Loznevoi waved his knife, twisting his left cheek into a mirthless smile. "I've seen them. They joined the collective farms but they hadn't got their hearts in it. And you see what happens now? As soon as there's no more Soviet power they come crawling out. They're all like your sow-thistle, old man. No matter how you work the land you can't root them out. Never!" He stepped nearer to Kostya. "And keep this in mind, old man, keep this in mind." He waved the knife in front of Kostya's face, "There's loads of them like our Erofei Kuzmich. That's the terrible part of it. They've come out into the open not only here, where

the Germans are. They're raising their heads now in the rear too, along the Volga and in Siberia. That's the terrible part of it!"

Kostya blinked his thin blond lashes, laboriously pondering over what Loznevoi had said. Several times he opened his mouth to speak, although he did not know what he was going to say; but Loznevoi kept interrupting him.

"Well, what do you say to that?" he asked, waving the knife. "What do you say to that?"

Before Kostya had a chance to reply footsteps sounded in the kitchen. Then the door opened and Maryika came in.

"Ah, Maryika!" Loznevoi exclaimed, both happy and embarrassed. He did not know how to talk to her after their tiff of the previous day. "Been at your mother's?"

"Yes."

That morning, whether from the wind or for some other reason, Maryika's face was brighter than it had been for some time. A pink glow suffused her cheeks. The dark little shawl still hung round her shoulders.

"Come over here," Loznevoi said tenderly.

Maryika sat down on the bench. Loznevoi and Kostya seated themselves on either side of her.

"Missed me?" she asked in the mischievous tone of her girlhood.

Loznevoi rejoiced. "Why, of course!" he replied delightedly, then added, "You're looking more cheerful today, Maryika."

"Can't expect me to cry all the time."

"Of course, not. You'd just fade away if you went on grieving as you have been lately."

"Don't talk about that," said Maryika.

"Why should you fade away?" Loznevoi persisted.

"Stop that!" Maryika said in a sharper tone.

Her father-in-law's grumbling voice came from the

kitchen. The three immediately fell silent, listening. One of the kitchen floor-boards creaked.

"He's coming here," Maryika whispered.

Erofei entered the room, rubbing his work-worn hands which he had just washed. He walked up to the mirror. "Where's the comb?" he asked Maryika, without turning to look at her.

"Behind the mirror."

Erofei spent a long time on his beard, painstakingly combing it out to the sides and upwards. Maryika instantly guessed that her father-in-law had something on his mind. Erofei put the comb back behind the mirror.

"Yes, I'm getting old, getting old," he remarked to no one in particular.

"Sit down and have a smoke, Erofei Kuzmich," Loznevoi suggested obsequiously. "That's good tobacco you've got."

"No time to sit down," Erofei replied without looking at anybody. "No time to go wandering about at night, or to wag my tongue, either."

Erofei had been growing more and more vexed with Maryika. Her intimacy with Loznevoi and Kostya of late irritated him beyond measure. But he had kept his silence: too little time had passed since the news of Andrei's death, and he realized that it would not be fitting to quarrel with his daughter-in-law. Now, however, he could contain his anger no longer.

"We bend our backs in toil all our lives," he growled, glancing round angrily. "We've no time for gadding about."

Maryika rose from the table. "What has to be done?"

"There's plenty of work in the house."

"What kind?"

"You have to be shown everything! You ought to see it yourself." He lowered his voice. "You've started to play around too soon. Too soon!"

Maryika leaned towards her father-in-law.

"You mean me?"

Erofei also leaned forward. "Go on! Go ahead! Claw out my eyes! That's just like you Logovs. All you—"

"That's enough, Erofei Kuzmich . . ." Loznevoi interrupted pleadingly.

"What do you mean that's enough? Who am I here?"

"It's not nice—"

Maryika walked over to the window. She straightened the shawl on her shoulders and looked out over the flowers into the street. The weather was tightening up. The sky had cleared and was turning an even frosty blue. Pigeons were circling above the village.

Erofei sat down at the table.

"Well, how do you feel? Better?"

"Getting along," Loznevoi replied evasively.

"Well, comrades from the army, tell me this: don't you think I want to go on living?" Erofei braced his hands on his knees. "Well, I do. But they'll chop off my head soon! Of course, life now isn't worth a straw, but I've got used to it and I don't want to go to my grave yet, even though I am getting old. I'd like to live to see good times. But it looks as if I won't have the chance."

"What's happened?" Loznevoi asked.

"Look, the weather's tightening up." Erofei nodded towards the window at which Maryika was standing. "Now we can expect the Germans. Especially after that fire. And when they come I'll be the first to have my head chopped off—the first. The whole village knows you're living in my house—and they're that kind of people. You know yourself, I didn't say a word to you. I've been keeping you and feeding you and giving you everything you need as long as I could. After all, you're our own kind; not relations, to be sure, but brothers all the same. But now I don't know what to do. I'll tell you the

truth: I'm afraid. It would be different if they didn't know in the village, if you'd come to me in secret—then I'd take the risk and hide you. But everybody knows it. All I do now when I walk through the village is look at the birches and wonder which one I'm going to hang from. Well, what shall we do about it? Think it over."

"We'll go away," Kostya declared resolutely. "Don't you worry."

"I'm not kicking you out, but it wants thinking over. All right, suppose they string me up on a birch-tree. But do you think they'll let you go free? It's you I'm thinking about. There's only one thing for you to do now, and that's go into hiding. Say what you like, but they'll give you away here in the village. There are people who'll do that. So think it over."

Erofei rose and left the room without waiting for his unwelcome boarders to tell him their final decision.

The moment he was gone, Maryika turned away from the window and quickly walked up to Loznevoi and Kostya. Glancing at the door, she said in an excited whisper, "Leave! Go to the partisans!"

Kostya caught Maryika by the sleeve. "The p-partisans? Where are they? Tell me!"

"I don't know," Maryika whispered, afraid that the door would open again. "I don't know that. But I can take you to a man who'll take you out there, to them." She waved her hand in the direction of the window. "He's one of them."

* XV *

All the flour mills in the locality were out of use. The villagers had no choice but to make hand-mills; from morning to night the grinding of their little mill-stones could be heard in almost every house. The Lopukhovs kept their mill in the storeroom. This room was

shrouded in twilight almost all the time. Against one wall stood a flour bin, and along the other, various tubs and baskets filled with hops and guelder-rose; from the ceiling hung bunches of bast and flax, steppe wormwood and wild thyme. In the quiet, dark corners of the store-room mice frisked about freely; even when the mill was working their squeaking could often be heard.

"Pour in some more!" Kostya said to Loznevoi in an irritable tone he had never used before, noticing that the stream of flour in the trough was thinning out again.

"Wait, Kostya. Take a rest."

"What damned work! I hope he chokes on this flour!" Kostya spat in disgust. "What a skinflint the son-of-a-bitch is!"

"But I tell you they're all like that."

"I haven't seen that kind since nineteen thirty." Kostya leaned over the bin. "No, I can't go on!"

"Tired so soon? All right, I'll turn."

"I can't go on living like this," Kostya explained.

Loznevoi also leaned over the bin. "Listen, old man, you were never like this before. Why can't you go on?"

"What kind of life is it?"

From behind the bin came the pattering and squeaking of mice. When they had quietened down, Kostya went on.

"Like those mice. How is it any better?"

Loznevoi gripped Kostya's arm.

"That's enough! Let's grind some more."

Kostya poured some grain into the funnel and Loznevoi bent over the handle. The stone began to turn with a grinding noise. A warm stream of flour trickled down the trough.

"Stop! I can't!" Kostya said. "What have you decided?" he asked softly, leaning his elbows on the mill. "To go?"

"To the partisans?"

"Yes."

"Listen, Kostya." Loznevoi took Kostya by the shoulders and placed him in front of him. "Tell me, old man, what did we grind yesterday?"

"Wheat."

"And today?"

"Well, rye."

Loznevoi shook Kostya, trying to make him smile. "But it all comes out flour just the same. Understand, old man?"

"You mean everything will t-turn out all right—anyway? But how soon?"

"Perhaps not soon. Who knows? We have to bide our time even if it means living like mice. The one thing we know now is that the Germans are right near Moscow. Think of that!"

"So it won't be soon," Kostya said. "Until the army gets its strength together and comes back here. . . . It'll take a long time, like grinding with this mill."

"But perhaps it won't. It isn't likely our army will get any strength together, Kostya. Where from?"

A bar of pale autumn sunlight broke through the bunches of dry herbs hanging over the little window and lit up Kostya's face. Loznevoi saw the bright, boyish features suddenly harden into firm, manly lines.

"What will happen?" Kostya asked in a low voice.

Loznevoi was puzzled by this abrupt change in Kostya's face. Now he bore no resemblance to the orderly who had once done his bidding with such boyish eagerness.

"What will happen?" Kostya repeated even more quietly.

"What will happen? The Germans will smash us—that's all!"

"Us?"

"They'll take Moscow now, and that'll be the end of us!"

Kostya drew his lips into a thin line. He fixed a cold, unwavering gaze on Loznevoi.

"Was that what you were thinking about all the time we were retreating?"

"Yes," Loznevoi admitted.

Still staring fixedly at Loznevoi, Kostya lunged out with sudden fury and caught him under the ribs with his fist. Taken by surprise, Loznevoi cried out and fell back against the baskets of guelder-rose. Kostya threw himself at his former Battalion Commander and dug his fingers into his throat. They grappled long and furiously, crashing against the tubs, empty pails, troughs and other lumber.

* XVI *

At first glance a tangled skein of thread may seem easy to unravel. But a tug at one thread will tangle the skein still more, and with the second pull it becomes clear that the tangle can never be unravelled.

Just such a hopeless tangle was Vladimir Loznevoi's life.

An only son, he had been spoiled by his loving father. Like all parents, Mikhail Alexandrovich Loznevoi, a land surveyor, had always felt that his son held great promise, was destined to become an outstanding personality. His imagination soared to poetic heights when he pictured Vladimir's future. When he presented the thin, unsociable boy with the big nose and blond forelock to guests, he would always exclaim with pride:

"See what a fine boy I have? I can assure you that his lot will be different from mine!" Then, touching the boy's hair tenderly, "He's going to be a great man. Aren't you, son?"

"Yes, Dad," Vladimir would answer promptly.

Nor were the guests, of course, sparing in praise of Vladimir. "A wonderful boy!" they would exclaim. "Just look at his expression!" or, "Yes, you can see at a glance he's a clever boy."

Since he had grown up from childhood with the thought of a lofty career always before him, Vladimir Loznevoi was afraid of only one thing: that he might ruin his career by choosing the wrong profession. During his first year at Kazan University he changed departments three times. Finally he realized that he could never be tempted by the prospect of a wanderer's life in search of mineral wealth in remote places, or of telling children the story of the apple that had led Newton to make his great discovery, or of spending days and nights conjuring with test tubes in a laboratory. All that was too petty for him. Occupied with a search for his true calling, Loznevoi of course neglected his studies. As a result, he was sent down from the university at the end of the year.

For two years he roamed about the country in search of "the real thing." Meanwhile he accepted work that was not too burdensome and paid as well as could be expected. At first he acted as manager for a wandering troupe of conjurors and acrobats, then he taught dancing at a small club.... Great deeds were being accomplished all over the country, but he had cut himself off from them. The entire nation was leading a life of intensive and united effort, but he had quietly excluded himself from that life. Then he was called up to the army.

For some reason, Loznevoi suddenly decided that the army was the place where he might show off his "remarkable" abilities to unusual advantage. He applied himself to the job with some keenness and, making use of every opportunity, rose fairly quickly to officer's rank,

The idea of becoming a staff officer appealed to him greatly. From then on he had only one desire: to climb higher and higher up the army ladder in order to achieve as quickly as possible a life of distinction and enjoyable renown. . . .

* XVII *

A young crane stood on a hummock, its right wing drooping to the ground. In the east a pale autumn dawn was slowly breaking. The crane mournfully surveyed its bleak, unfamiliar surroundings—a tufty marsh spotted with clusters of stunted birches, reeds and wild grass. In summer this would have made a fine place to live: it had an abundance of water and grass and all kinds of crawling things. But now the swamp and everything in it lay motionless, locked in the grip of the cold. Dry frozen grass rustled in the wind. The deserted marsh struck terror into the crane's heart in that hour of dawn. It hopped to another hummock, and then to a third, trailing its crippled wing. Halting, it again threw a lost, forlorn look round it, recalled the flock with which it had been flying to warm lands, and sent a piteous cry out over the marsh.

"Must have fallen behind, I suppose?" said Kostya.

"Yes, looks as if it's hurt," Serga Hakhai replied. "It'll die here. We have hard frosts."

They were walking west from Olkhovka. Both wore sheepskin jackets, fur hats and sturdy boots. Each had a heavy bundle over his shoulder. The wind stung their faces.

By the time the sun was up they were in Elk Forest. As they walked through the forest a new feeling came to Kostya. He could not exactly put his finger on it, but somehow it made him feel better. The forest was old and thick. Mossy, venerable firs lined the cart track,

spreading their thick dark branches over it. Their lofty tips swayed to and fro in the wind, but down below, on the mossy forest floor with its pattern of ferns, all was quiet and motionless. The fir trunks lined the track like a palisade, without a single break. The forest was just like those along the Kama. "It's one and the same land everywhere," flashed through Kostya's mind, "and all of it is ours."

In the heart of the forest they were met by a partisan patrol. Then they emerged into a big clearing, and Kostya saw a forester's hut with a moss-covered roof and sagging shutters. Serga Hakhai explained that the partisans had taken over this hut. Now Kostya suddenly realized that a new life was beginning for him, and that the pleasant feeling he had had on the way came from the anticipation that this new life was soon to begin.

The hut was crowded. On a table in the corner two men in uniform were stripping and cleaning a machine-gun. "Back with the boys again!" Kostya rejoiced. "Old hands, by the look of it." Beside them a tall, lean man in glasses, who looked like a village school teacher, was carefully packing away his things into a hunter's knapsack. Two girls in ordinary town clothes were whispering near the window as they examined a telephone apparatus. At another table a heavily built young man in driver's overalls was loudly instructing two youngsters on how to use a hand grenade.

Stepan Boyarkin rose from the table in the near corner. His thin, sickly face was covered with thick lather.

"Aha, wanderer, so you've turned up?" he said curtly, but with a note of pleasure in his voice. "Come over here. What took you so long?"

"Business," answered Hakhai.

"I know all about you and your business. I bet your Ksenia wouldn't let you go, eh?"

"There's a comrade with me," Hakhai announced as he shook Boyarkin's hand. He glanced backward. "Come along."

"Who's that?" Boyarkin asked.

With an embarrassed air Kostya began to tell Boyarkin about himself. The other partisans gathered round the table.

"Have you any papers on you?" Boyarkin asked.

"Steady on," Hakhai drawled. "What kind of papers could he have?"

"Why not?" Kostya cast an injured glance at Hakhai. "I have my papers with me."

"Which?"

"Depends what you want. I have my Young Communist League card."

"Let's see it."

Kostya looked round at the partisans in embarrassment.

"Lost it?" Boyarkin smiled ironically.

"Oh, all right!" Kostya said with resolution. He opened his sheepskin jacket and began to unbutton his trousers.

"Just where do you keep your papers?" Boyarkin asked with a broad grin.

"See where?"

"Well, strike me down!" Hakhai exclaimed. He laughed until he had to hold his sides. "So that's where he's hidden them!"

Everyone else began to laugh.

"What are you cackling about?" Kostya said in a hurt tone. "What's the joke? Perhaps I hadn't got any other place that was safe! Dash that button!"

"All right, all right," Boyarkin said, still grinning. "Go over to the stove and warm your hands. You'll get it out later. I'll finish shaving and then we'll have a talk. Over to the stove, quick march!"

"Yes!" Kostya answered joyfully in the precise tone he always used in the army.

Serga and Kostya found themselves seats by the stove. Soon Boyarkin joined them. He lit his cigarette on a piece of charcoal from the fire and then attentively looked over Kostya's papers.

"All in order," he said finally. "Make yourself at home. You'll soon get down to work. This is going to be a big thing. People are gathering in all the forests. Any weapons?"

"No."

"You'll find some," Boyarkin said encouragingly.

He pulled another piece of charcoal out of the stove, balanced it for a second on his palm while he lit up again, then rose to his feet.

"Yes, we'll soon get down to work!" he said thoughtfully.

* XVIII *

There was a clatter of buckets and tubing and strips of tin in the empty shed; Erofei was putting up a still. For three days now the house had been filled with the strong, intoxicating odour of mash. The smell made his wife feel ill; several times she sent Maryika out to learn how Erofei was getting on with the work. Each time he met her at the door and sent her away. Once, however, he asked her a question.

"That good-for-nothing, is he in the house?"

"Where else could he be?"

"Send him here."

It was a pale and worried Loznevoi who reported to the shed. Now that Kostya had gone and he was alone, he sat beside the stove in the best room all day long, like a badger in his hole. Poking his thin hooked nose and pointed Tartar beard through the open door, he asked nervously:

"You called me, Erofei Kuzmich?"

"Come here!"

Loznevoi stepped cautiously into the shed. Erofei lifted his head from behind a vat.

"Haven't left?"

"Where can I go, Erofei Kuzmich?"

"Where'd that one go?"

"Into the forest somewhere."

"You ought to have gone together. What's the sense in sitting here?"

"I can't," Loznevoi answered, trying to control his trembling lips. "My health is poor. And besides, what good are partisans? Look at the army we had, and it was smashed. What can the partisans do? Winter will be here soon, and then they'll just break up without even fighting. It's all the same whether I'm killed in the woods or here."

"Huh! It may be all the same to you." Erofei rose to his feet and leaned on the vat. "But what about me? Did you ever think of that? Do you realize the risk I'm running in keeping you here? They'll kill you. You're a Bolshevik."

"I'm not a Bolshevik," Loznevoi hastened to interrupt.

"Well, you were with them. It's the same thing. Why should I have to pay for it?"

Erofei knew very well that once Loznevoi had not gone with Kostya it meant he would not go at all—and hence was completely in his power. Now he could do whatever he wished with him, treat him just as he liked.

"You get out too! And that's that!" he barked.

Loznevoi's shoulders began to shake. He fell on his knees in front of Erofei and caught at the hem of his coat.

"Erofei Kuzmich! Dear Erofei Kuzmich! Don't kill me! Don't throw me out! Where can I go?"

"Stop that! What are you doing? Let go!"

"Don't throw me out!" Loznevoi whispered, trembling from head to foot.

"Well, get up, get up." Erofei sat down on the wood-pile. "What am I going to do with you? It's a risk, you know, a risk."

"Perhaps—"

"Perhaps, perhaps!" Erofei interrupted him sharply. "The Germans won't bother to ask questions. If you're a Bolshevik they'll shoot you, and they'll shoot me if I've been hiding a Bolshevik."

Loznevoi was silent. He stood with bent back in front of Erofei.

"Well, all right," Erofei finally said in a softer tone. "I'll ask everybody to keep quiet about you. I'll tell them I'm saving an army officer. Maybe they won't give you away. Perhaps God will be kind. And so from today on you're my nephew. Get that? You'll be deaf and dumb. Can you do it?"

Loznevoi's lips barely moved. "I can."

"Deaf and dumb. Ever since you were a baby. Now don't forget!" Erofei said firmly as he rose from the wood-pile. "Not another word out of you. You'll work and you'll live here. As my nephew." He ran his eyes over Loznevoi's tall, thin figure as though estimating his worth as a farm-hand. "And now go and start carrying over the mash with Maryika. It's time to set the still going. When we finish we'll have a little drink. Like a drink?"

"I would—"

"Now then!" Erofei shouted. "Forgotten, have you? You're deaf and dumb. Well, like a drink, a drink?" He raised his voice, as one does when talking to the deaf, and lifted an imaginary glass to his lips.

Loznevoi nodded.

"That's better! And what are you doing in those boots? Take off your boots!" Erofei shouted again. "Take them off! You'll mess them up with the mash. Put on bast shoes! Bast shoes!" He bent down and went through the motions of tying on bast shoes. "Get it?"

Loznevoi nodded in confusion.

"Looks as if you'll do," Erofei concluded. "Off with you!"

... Late in the afternoon the still was set going full blast. A fire licked the bottom of the iron boiler set up on big stones. A U-shaped iron tube ran from the boiler to a forty-gallon vat, the top of which was sealed with dough reinforced by strips of cloth. Inside the vat the mash bubbled away noisily, and an intoxicating steam curled up from under the dough. A straight tube led from the vat to the condenser—a small empty cask standing on a block of wood—and then to the cooling vat. At the very bottom of the cooler was a small outlet with a piece of cloth wrapped round it. From the cloth a pungent whitish liquid trickled into a bottle. The whole apparatus rumbled and burbled and shook. The air around it was smoky and smelled of the mash.

Loznevoi sat silently by the boiler poking the fire with a stick while with fresh dough Maryika stopped up the holes in the top of the mash vat through which steam was escaping. Maryika was amazed at Loznevoi's refusal to go off to the partisans with Kostya. She could not understand what it meant. All day she had been looking for an opportunity to talk to him about it. Now, beside the still, she brought up the topic again and again, but Loznevoi maintained a stubborn silence, glancing fearfully at the door.

"Why don't you say something?" Maryika asked. "Lost your tongue?"

Loznevoi turned to her, his face brightly lit up by the fire. "What can I say now?" he replied in a low voice.

"Why didn't you go?"
Loznevoi threw his stick into the fire. "Oh, Maryika! You don't know how hard it is for me! My life is over. I know that everything is finished. And I'm frightened. I sit beside this still, and I feel as though I were in hell. . . ."
"You'd have done better to have gone," Maryika remarked. "Even for me it's not easy living here, and you're a total stranger. Why didn't you go?"
Loznevoi covered his face with his hands.
"I couldn't."
"Why not?"
"I couldn't. I couldn't make myself."
The door creaked. Erofei entered. He wore a bulky brown sheepskin and a grey dog-fur hat with ear-flaps. Already from the doorway he noticed that a jet of steam was escaping from the outlet through which the liquor trickled. He rushed over to the still.
"Hey, you! What are you doing? You stuffed monkey, you! Break up the fire, quick!"
Frightened out of his wits, Loznevoi began to snatch pieces of burning wood from under the boiler and scatter them all round. The shed grew thick with smoke.
"The minute my back is turned!" Erofei exclaimed. "You could have ruined the whole business."
"Why, what's happened?" Maryika asked.
"Don't you see? Why did you raise so much steam? Before you knew it the mash might have gone into the bottle, or the pipes smashed to hell. You've got to use your head!"
The still began to gurgle more softly. Erofei grew calmer. He placed an empty bottle under the outlet with the piece of cloth round it and raised the filled one to the level of his eyes.
"Wonder if it's all right."
Seating himself on the wood-pile in front of the fire, Erofei took an onion and a teacup with a flowered

design from his coat pocket. He filled the cup to the brim with liquor and passed a burning splinter over it. A blue flame danced in the cup.

"It's all right, it'll do!"

As he raised the cup he glanced at Loznevoi, who stood beside him silently rubbing his burnt fingers with the bottom of his ragged jacket. Erofei's face glowed with self-satisfaction in the fire-light.

"Well," he said, "to our health!"

He drained the cup unhurriedly, gave a satisfied cough, and set the cup down on the floor at his feet. Then he took a bite of the onion and put it back in his pocket.

"Well, such is life. You never know what's in store. What'll happen tomorrow? That's the question. Ah, man has a hard time of it on this earth.... Here you, have a drink!"

One cup of the strong liquor went to Loznevoi's head. When Erofei retired to the house he sat down on the wood-pile in his place and looked about him drunkenly. Emboldened, he called to Maryika.

"Stop what you're doing and come over here."

Maryika sat down beside him.

"Why didn't I leave, you say? Well, I'll tell you, I'll tell you everything. It makes no difference now. Everything! Everything!" He was growing more and more drunk every minute. "I couldn't leave this house. I couldn't! I've lost power over myself! Do you understand?"

"But why couldn't you?"

Loznevoi seized Maryika's hands and drew them to him. "I couldn't—" He paused for breath, "I couldn't go away from you!"

Maryika tore her hands loose.

"I couldn't!" shouted Loznevoi. "I can't live without you!"

Maryika rose. "You're drunk."

Suddenly she felt that her face was on fire. Recent scenes flashed through her mind. She recalled the day Loznevoi had arrived with Andrei; how his eyes had followed her about the house; how he had spoken to her on the road outside the village; how he had lain on the porch and for a long time had not answered her question about Andrei. . . .

"He lied to me!" The thought seared her brain. "He lied to me, the snake!" A wave of terrible anger and wild joy surged up in her breast. She hurled the lump of dough in her hand at the tub.

"You won't go?" she shouted. "You don't want to?"

"No, I don't want to," Loznevoi answered faintly.

"Then I'll go!" Maryika shouted at the top of her voice. "Oh, you louse! What a louse you are!"

The wood-pile shifted under Loznevoi.

"Why?"

"You know why, you rotten louse!"

"Maryika, dearest, don't go away!"

Maryika's answer was to slam the shed door.

She stood for several minutes on the steps. A silent, starless autumn night hung over Olkhovka and the world around. It bore down on the earth with a leaden oppressiveness. Nowhere was there the slightest sign of life. But Maryika's heart beat in her breast joyfully, noisily, with all its might.

At midnight she left for her mother's.

* XIX *

In the morning the Germans arrived.

The villagers first caught sight of them as they came up the hill. Big, dock-tailed, drab-coated horses lumbered along with lowered heads, pulling heavy army carts. During the night the weather had turned bad again. Some

of the Germans sat hunched up in the carts; others walked, slipping in the mud and turning their backs to the cold, penetrating wind. Occasionally they looked up at the faint spot in the lowering skies that bore no resemblance whatever to the sun.

Everybody took to their homes. The Germans were astonished at the unusual quiet that met them when they entered the village. Suddenly the barking of a dog rang out over the street. A little reddish-brown dog jumped out from a gateway and made for the carts. A tall soldier in a mud-spattered greatcoat turned and kicked it away from his cart. The dog landed in a puddle but leaped out and without stopping to shake itself dashed at the horses with vicious yelps. As though a signal had been given, dogs ran out into the street from the other yards—and there were plenty of dogs in Olkhovka. They raised a discordant howl. As the Germans moved down toward the centre of the village they kicked the dogs away from the carts and the horses, and lashed out at them with their whips. But nothing helped: the dogs circled about the train of carts, yelping and barking, as though they had gone mad. Holding their breath, the villagers peeped through the windows at the procession of Germans, and thought to themselves, "It's a bad sign, the dogs acting like that. . . ."

The Germans came to a halt on the village green and promptly entered the building of the collective-farm office. Ageyevna, the watchwoman, soon came running out. She described how the frozen Germans immediately brought in bottles of vodka and tinned food and proceeded to refresh themselves after their journey, keeping up a constant chatter in their outlandish tongue. Everybody grew anxious for the fate of Curly Yasha, who was left alone in the office with the Germans.

What happened in the office after that will always remain a mystery. An hour later Curly Yasha dashed

out of the building, screaming. He had nothing on but his shirt, and his face and curls were smeared with pitch. (Just before the Germans came Yasha had melted a pot of pitch for some purpose or other.) Reeling and sobbing loudly, Yasha disappeared down the first lane. The women found him in a patch of trampled burdock out past the vegetable gardens and took him over to Anfissa Logova's.

There Yasha lost his curls.

Anfissa shaved him herself. She made a bad job of it and it took her a long time. Pressing Yasha's head to her breast, she poked the brush now in his ear, now down his neck, or spent ages working up a lather on the back of his head. The women stood round sadly in a circle, their chins cupped in their hands. They spoke up only when Anfissa nicked him.

"Oh, careful there!"

"You'll cut him to pieces!"

Yasha shorn of his locks was unrecognizable. He sat at the table and tentatively, as though after a long and severe illness, turned his little yellow misshapen head from side to side. It resembled a small pumpkin that had had to grow between the palings of a fence. The bones of his skull stood out very clearly, as though covered not with skin but with a thin layer of varnish. The pitiful lines in his face were deeper. He looked older and his abnormality was revealed.

"The Germans are fools," Yasha said. "They play jokes."

The women, struck by the change in Yasha, sighed quietly. Anfissa hugged him and tried to comfort him.

"Never mind, Yasha dear, never mind," she said through her tears. "Never mind, darling. It will all pass."

Then, remembering that Yasha, egged on by the jokes of the villagers, had planned to marry the school

teacher, Nina Dmitrievna, and had boasted to everyone how much she loved him, she added, almost in earnest.

"You'll see, you'll be getting married soon. Nina Dmitrievna will come back, and then you'll get married. Never mind, dear."

Yasha suddenly turned pale.

"A mirror!" he demanded anxiously. "Give me a mirror!"

They gave him a mirror. Yasha took one look at himself, one quick look, then, wrinkling up his face piteously, gazed at the women for a long time. His expression as much as said: "Why did you do it? Why did you shave my hair off? Now I have no more curls and Nina Dmitrievna won't love me." Many of the women could not hold back their tears. With a groan Yasha fell forward on to the table and began to scratch at it with his fingernails.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" Anfissa sighed.

All of a sudden Yasha fell silent. A few moments later he got up. The women saw that his big eyes, always so full of affection, now blazed with a dark, evil force. He clenched his fists and screamed furiously, "I'm going! I'm going!" and ran out.

In a little while cries and shots came from the village green. Fighting down their fear, the women dashed out of the house with Anfissa at their head.

Metallic voices resounded in the management office. On the porch, leaning against the roof post, in a shabby, unbuttoned sheepskin, his fur cap cocked to one side, stood Erofei Lopukhov. He kept lowering his eyes and then raising them again. At his feet lay the thin, boyish figure of Curly Yasha. His right ear was pressed to the ground, as though he were listening for something, and his left hand scratched at the earth. There was foam on his open lips and blood trickled from the corner of

his mouth. In the mud beside him lay a small carpenter's axe.

As the villagers ran towards the porch, not yet knowing what had happened, several Germans emerged from the house. One of them, a tall, lean man with a small snake-like head, adjusted the pince-nez on his nose, bent over Yasha, picked up his left hand and held it while he took his pulse. Then for some reason he ran his fingers over Yasha's shaven, mud-spattered skull, and gave an order.

The Germans picked Yasha up and carried him into the building.

Erofei tore himself away from the post.

"Well, women, this is a fine business!" he said with an embarrassed sigh. "I was just on the way to Anfissa's over there, and he runs into me—out of that lane. One look at him and a shiver ran down my back. He was running this way, crazy as a loon, foaming at the mouth, and he had an axe in his hand.... Well, I thought, he'll run in there to them and start a fight, and we'll have to answer for him, an idiot, the Lord forgive me. I reckoned the whole village would have to suffer on account of him. After all, it could have happened like that."

"Don't beat about the bush, kinsman," Anfissa said grimly.

"So I thought I'd stand in his way and stop the idiot," Erofei went on. "But he goes for me with the axe. Phew, it still makes me shiver! I still don't know how I got away from him. And the minute he got to the porch, there they were.... Yes, he's an idiot for sure—just went asking to be killed...." He nodded at the axe lying in the mud: "Whose is that? Who'd he get it from? They ought to take it."

No one spoke. The axe was left lying in the mud.

Another German, a tall, portly man in light-tan boots, clumped out on the porch. He wore a jacket but no hat;

the wind lightly ruffled the tuft of hair that stood up over his broad forehead. Placing his hands behind his back and spreading his legs, he lifted high a face reddened by wind and wine. He stood in this pose for about a minute without moving, and there was no way of telling what he was looking at, his grey eyes were so lifeless.

"I am Commandant!" Kweiss boomed all of a sudden, still without moving. "You listen my orders! If not listen, I shoot! My order is order of German army. Understand, yes?"

No one answered. But Kweiss apparently required no answer. He walked forward and took one step down, his hobnailed boots clattering. Then, pointing a finger at Erofei, he addressed the crowd:

"This your man, yes?"

"He's from here," Grandpa Silanty spoke up, after a pause.

"Good man? You know him, yes?"

"We know him. He's a good man. But what he'll be like now—who can tell?" Grandpa said boldly.

"Do your talk at home!" Kweiss said angrily, shaking back his tuft of hair. "This is business! I propose to elect—" Again he poked his finger at Erofei. "What is your name?"

Erofei backed away into the crowd. "I don't want to! I don't want anything!"

"What is your name?" Kweiss repeated sharply.

"Lopukhov."

"I propose to elect Herr Lopukhoff your elder. Who is against? Nobody against? That is all. Disperse! *Schnell!*"

The crowd drifted away.

Only Erofei remained near the porch.

"Why the devil did I ever try and stop Yasha!" he groaned. "Showed myself willing to serve the Germans. . . . Now try and get out of it."

Unhurriedly Commandant Kweiss set a black plastic cup on the edge of the table and filled it with a light-coloured liquid from a tall bottle with a gaudy label.

"Drink," he ordered with a brief glance at Erofei. "It is schnapps."

Erofei pressed his hat to his chest.

"Thank you. . . ."

"You are elder," Kweiss explained gently. "You must listen to German Commandant. My order is order of German army. You must exactly my order execute."

"The devil himself made me come here," Erofei thought despondently. "I ought to have kept out of sight." He lifted the cup carefully, afraid of spilling it, drank it down and slowly wiped his moustache.

"Not bad. Only it's a bit weaker than ours."

"You are elder," Kweiss again began to explain. "You must answer all questions of German Commandant. You understand, yes?"

"Yes, everything is clear. . . ."

Kweiss busied himself for a time with a tin. Erofei watched him closely. For the life of him he could not make out what the German was eating. "Must be some kind of fruit they have?" he thought. "Or perhaps it's just plain turnip." Laying the fork down, Kweiss leaned back in the heavy wooden armchair and fixed his eyes on the elder.

"Where your Bolshefiks?"

Erofei straightened up before the table.

"We have no Bolsheviks," he said with conviction. "There weren't many anyway. Some went into the army, the others ran off. The chairman of the village Soviet left long ago, and the collective-farm chairman was the last to push off."

"Push off?"

"Oh, leave, I mean. . . ."

"Where to?"

"In the direction of Moscow."

"Oh, Moskau!" Kweiss rolled his eyes. "German army will soon be in Moskau. Oh, it is big city!" He addressed the elder again, "He left for Moskau? You must speak exactly."

"Well, I am. Saw him go with my own eyes. The women came back, but he went on. We've been living without any authorities."

The elder's report evidently did not satisfy Kweiss. He twisted his bulk in the armchair, working his jaws. Then he began to fill his pipe. He lit up and held the match over the table, watching it slowly burn out.

"And who set fire to grain?"

"Who knows! That was at night."

"At night!" Kweiss snorted, enveloping himself in a cloud of smoke, "You must know! You are elder! You must tell German Commandant who set fire to grain. Understand, yes?"

"Yes. . . . Only how can I know?"

Kweiss banged the table with his fist.

"You must know! We will know!" He rose and then spoke in a different voice. "Here is my first order."

"Yes. . . ."

From the Commandant's office Erofei walked the length of the village, announcing Kweiss's most strict order: all the dogs had to be hanged on the gates at once. For failure to fulfil this order there was only one punishment: the hanging of the owners, also on the gates, side by side with their dogs. The villagers were dumbfounded at the Commandant's order. Soon yelps and barks rang out all over the village.

Erofei returned home in a black mood. As he opened the gate he saw Chorny leap out from under the porch. The faithful watchdog looked at his master without mov-

ing from the spot, wagged his tail twice and suddenly scurried away to the barn with his tail between his legs. Erofei was amazed, "Can it be he senses death? A creature like that, eh?" He was moved in spite of himself. "He wants to live too!" A shadow crossed Erofei's face.

Loznevoi appeared in the entrance to the shed. He wore a long coat pulled in by a belt, bast shoes and an old hat. On orders from the master of the house he had been cleaning dung out of the shed since morning.

"Finished?" Erofei called out.

."Just a little bit more, Erofei Kuzmich."

"Oho, talking again, eh?" Erofei shouted. "Forgot again! You just watch out! I'm risking my neck for you! Hurry up and finish!"

Alevtina rattled the pots without speaking, but Erofei refused to have dinner. Without taking off his coat or hat he sat down at the table.

"What's the matter with you?" asked his wife.

"I don't want any dinner, that's what! Must I explain everything to you! Always fixing on to me like a bur!"

"Just become elder and lost your appetite already?"

"Oh, stop your nagging!"

Vasya was sitting by the window with a book. Every now and then he glanced up at his father.

"Stop reading that book!" Erofei said. "There's a job to do."

"What is it, Dad?"

"Hang Chorny."

"Chorny?" Vasya sprang to his feet. "What for?"

"Go and ask him. . . ."

"Who, Dad?"

"That Commandant, that's who."

Alevtina grew really frightened.

"Kuzmich, what's the matter? Are you in your right mind?"

Erofei nodded towards the window. "Can't you hear the racket the dogs are making all over the village? Come on. We've got to hurry."

Vasya burst into tears and rushed to the door.

"I won't give you Chorny! I won't!"

"Vasya!" Erofei rose. "Perhaps you want me to hang on the gate in place of Chorny? Do you?"

"I won't, I won't!" Vasya shouted still louder, sobbing. "I'll run away with him! So there! Let him look for us—your Commandant—that rotten German!"

"Vasya!" Erofei made for the door. "Do you want the strap? Do you know what you're saying?" He caught his son by the hair. "Do you realize what'll happen for that, you little snot? Do you? Do you?"

"Go away!" Vasya burst out. "I raised Chorny from a tiny—just a puppy—Chorny!" he screamed, throwing himself down near the doorstep. "Chorny, my darling!"

Pushing Vasya aside with his foot, Erofei slammed the door so hard the whole house shook. As soon as he saw his master Chorny gave a yelp, bolted away from the porch and jumped over the fence into the vegetable garden.

He had to call on Loznevoi for help. Loznevoi made a noose out of a piece of rope, went into the garden, called fondly to Chorny, and caught him. When he suddenly felt the noose around his neck Chorny gave a short bark, flung himself to the side and then, choking, reared up on his hind legs. Loznevoi yanked at the rope and brought the dog to the ground.

"Drag him over here!" Erofei shouted from the fence. "Don't let him go! Don't give him air! Well, pull him over, you clumsy devil!"

Loznevoi dragged the dog out of the vegetable garden. Frothing at the mouth, his eyes bulging and his tongue hanging out, Chorny flung himself from side to side; he twisted in the mud, tried to brace himself

with his front legs, pressed his belly against the ground....

"Jerk him up!" Erofei ordered. "Get him off the ground! Don't be afraid! What are you trembling for as if you'd got fever? Pull him over here!"

"Help me!" Loznevoi could not restrain himself from saying.

"Oho, talking again, are you? Give him here!"

After he had tossed the end of the rope over the cross-piece of the gate, Erofei turned aside.

"Hang him yourself," he said, clutching at his chest. "I can't...."

When Erofei glanced at the gate a minute later he saw Chorny hanging in the noose, his paws twitching feebly. Then he noticed Commandant Kweiss, hands folded over his broad backside towering on the little rise opposite the yard. The Commandant must have come out to see how the village was fulfilling his first order. He was flanked on one side by a German soldier with a sub-machine gun and on the other by Efim Chernyavkin, now beardless and in a new jacket. The latter was saying something to the Commandant, nodding towards the Lopukhov house, probably telling him where the elder lived.

"He's coming here!" Erofei flung back over his shoulder.

But Loznevoi lost his head and stood frozen to the spot. While he was making up his mind which part of the yard to run to, Commandant Kweiss, accompanied by his soldier, reached the wicket, which Erofei opened; the Commandant's hobnailed boots left deep imprints in the damp earth.

"Elder knows rules!" Kweiss said cheerfully, pleased that the elder he had appointed had carried out his first order to the letter and thereby set an example to the

entire village. "Oh, we work good with elder. Fery good!"

Then, as a sign that genuine friendly relations had now been established between himself and his elder, Kweiss even went so far as to slap Erofei on the shoulder.

"*Gut* elder! *Gut*!"

"*Gut, Gut*," Erofei repeated in confusion. He could hear Loznevoi behind him and tried to screen him from view with his body.

But Kweiss had already caught sight of Loznevoi.

"Who is he?"

Erofei stepped back from the wicket. When he saw that Efim Chernyavkin had disappeared over the rise his spirits rose, and he answered in as casual a voice as he could assume:

"Him? Oh, he's my nephew. Deaf and dumb."

"I do not understand. What do you mean?"

"He's deaf and dumb! Deaf and dumb!" Erofei repeated. He tried to explain by gestures, but this only made the Commandant more puzzled than before.

Kweiss thought that the elder was joking in the "Russian style." "O, elder is joker," he laughed, in a good humour from the wine. "*Gut* elder."

"*Gut, gut*," Erofei hastened to repeat. Now he felt more sure of himself.

With the eye of a connoisseur Kweiss examined Chorny, who was slowly turning to the west on the noose. Then he pointed to Loznevoi and asked, "He hanged him, yes?"

"Yes, yes, of course!"

It was all Loznevoi could do to stop himself trembling.

"Good job!" Kweiss said. "I saw it. Quick! He can hang fery good."

Erofei saw that the danger had passed, and in his relief he said:

"Herr Commandant, won't you come into the house? You are welcome to all we have. That schnapps, we have some.... *Gut* schnapps!"

"Oh, schnapps!" Kweiss exclaimed, and stepped through the wicket.

As they mounted the steps Erofei caught sight of the little bag with the stalk of Peter's Cross hanging above the door. He heaved a sigh, hastily mumbled a few words of the first prayer he could think of, and crossed the threshold into the passage.

* XXI *

By noon all the dogs had been hanged.

The people of Olkhovka had always considered that the presence of a dog made a real yard and that without one the place was deserted.

And now there were no dogs.

With the yards silent, the long autumn nights were terrifying: every minute it seemed as though someone were knocking at the gate, wandering about the yard, stealing into the barn, shuffling in the passage.... Everybody was oppressed by the same feeling—that by hanging their dogs they had ceased to be masters of their homes, their property, their own lives.

The Germans took over the collective-farm office as the Commandant's office, and in the Oreshkin house next door, left empty after the family's departure, they set up their living quarters. They cut down several thin young birches in the middle of the village—the village immediately lost a little of its soft, radiant glow—and made them into long rails without stripping the bark. With these they fenced off both buildings. The tops of the trees were used to form an aisle leading up to the door of the Com-

mandant's office, where a sentry armed with a sub-machine gun was at once stationed. He stood there hunched up, sheltering his face from the wind.

What went on inside the houses the Germans had taken over none of the villagers knew. Everybody was worried about Curly Yasha.

"Probably dead, poor dear. . . ."

"If he was dead they'd give us the body to bury."

"Perhaps they're treating him. One of them is a doctor, isn't he?"

"Perhaps they are, if there's a doctor there. . . ."

The next day Commandant Kweiss was indisposed: the Russian home-brewed schnapps had been too much for him. He did not appear and did not even summon Erofei. At the door the sentries relieved one another in turn. In the yards they had taken over the Germans pottered about silently round their carts; they carried water from the wells and brought armfuls of fire-wood into the houses. Smoke poured from the chimneys all the time. As they looked at the houses occupied by the Germans, the villagers swore to themselves.

"Damn those silent devils!"

"If they'd only tell us about Yasha. . . ."

When Kweiss had recovered a little from his severe hang-over, Doctor Rhöde invited him into his room. It was evening. The windows were tightly curtained with black-out paper. On the table stood small round lampions filled with reeking fat. They produced a faint, flickering light.

"My dear Kweiss," said the doctor, "I am leaving tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"This trip I have made with you," continued the doctor, adjusting the pince-nez on his nose, "despite the various hardships en route, I consider positively extraordinary. I have succeeded in obtaining here ex-

tremely interesting and very important material for my new book."

Kweiss had still not recovered properly from his hang-over. "For the book?" he asked, staring hazily at the lights.

"Yes. You know, I am sure, that I left my splendid laboratory in Strassburg and upon a commission from Professor Hirt have been accompanying the army in order to acquire as much material as possible for my new book. In it I shall give very convincing proof of the superiority of the German race over all other races, especially over the Slav race, which nature itself has doomed partially to extinction in the very near future, and partially to become our slaves. . . ."

"Yes, I heard about that," Kweiss answered. "It should be a wonderful book. And have you already succeeded in getting hold of important material for it here?"

"I shall show you right away, my dear Kweiss."

Silently Doctor Rhöde opened his suitcase. Glancing into it, Kweiss was taken aback by what he saw: the suitcase was filled to the top with human skulls and bones, gleaming white. Doctor Rhöde carefully took out a small skull and placed it on the table between two lampions.

"I don't understand," Kweiss said uneasily.

"This is the skull of the deputy chairman of the Olkhovka collective farm, a Bolshevik," Rhöde said. "It will be placed in the museum of our society in Strassburg for the study of phenomena of heredity."*

"His?" Kweiss marvelled.

"He is a typical representative of the Russian nation,

* As established at the Nuremberg trials, on instructions from Himmler, a collection of skeletons and skulls representing all races and peoples was built up in Strassburg under the guidance of Hauptsturmführer Professor Hirt, director of one of the departments of the Administration's Institute of Military Research on Questions of Heredity.—*Author's note.*

which is doomed to extinction," Doctor Rhöde continued. He touched the skull. "You will note that the entire structure of the skull indicates very clearly the low mental development of this representative of the Russian nation. As a result of intermarriage, the Russian tribes have already degenerated into veritable idiots, can be used only as beasts of burden; and the majority of them are simply a danger to the new society we are setting up in Europe. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do," Kweiss said, swaying forward.

The Commandant's head was not yet quite clear. He looked at the table, and before his eyes spread a vast expanse over which were scattered piles of twisted metal and a multitude of skulls, and everywhere fires were blazing. . . .

* XXII *

The next day Olkhovka witnessed a new occurrence, the like of which it had never known, not even in the darkest periods of its long history.

Erofei had firmly resolved to live quietly and unobtrusively, like a bat. "Look at the way bats live," he often reflected. "When the bad weather comes they hide and go to sleep, and when summer arrives they come to life again. And even in summer they only fly about their business at night. That's the way they live! Smart creatures they are!"

From the very first Erofei had resented the behaviour of the Germans in the village. He had become deeply convinced that they were really cruel and merciless, and that while they were there any sort of crimes might be expected. Hence, although he had become elder under pressure from Kweiss, he secretly resolved to shirk his duties in every possible way. No benefits were to be derived from them, and they could easily get him into

trouble. When he discovered that Kostya had gone off into the woods, where there were partisans, he realized that he would have to be especially careful. If the partisans were to learn he was serving the Germans faithfully, he would suffer for it. Accordingly, he decided never to appear at the Commandant's office without a summons, and to perform all his duties, until he could get rid of the job, in such a way that all the villagers understood he personally meant them no harm whatsoever.

When he was summoned to the Commandant's office that day, he turned to his family and conjectured, "Perhaps they're planning to leave, eh?"

"May the devil take them the sooner!" his wife answered.

"You wait, he will!" Vasya, who was lying on the stove shelf, put in confidently.

"After all, what have they to do here?" Erofei said, flinging a coat over his shoulders. "There's nothing for them to do here. They should be fighting. Ye-es, they must be leaving.... Where are my mittens? If they leave, it'll be better, less trouble."

On the village green in front of the management office stood a few ancient birches with rough, split bark at their bases; long branches drooped from their cone-shaped tops almost to the ground. Some years ago benches had been built beneath these birches, and two big stones worn smooth by time stood there. The elderly collective farmers often used to make it their meeting-place after the day's work. They would open their pouches, roll cigarettes, and, puffing away, leisurely discuss collective-farm affairs, and the affairs of the country and the world as well. Sometimes, when the weather was sultry, collective-farm meetings were conducted there under the birches. In spring and summer the young people of the village gave up the club-house and held their evening gatherings under the birches. The merriment lasted until midnight,

with singing and dancing and accordions playing. It was a happy, joyous spot.

As he crossed the green Erofei glanced at the birches and came to an amazed halt. Germans were crowding round the trees. Axes glittered in their hands.

"It can't be they want to cut those down too?" he wondered. "May their hands wither away on them, those German dogs! What are they up to? That means they're not planning to leave yet. . . ." Then Erofei saw that the Germans had not come out to cut down the trees. They were putting up a bar between two of them. He did not understand what the bar was for, but his heart gave a sudden stab. "What are they planning, eh?" He stood there another moment, puzzled, then went on, glancing about apprehensively.

When he was near the Commandant's office he saw Efim Chernyavkin emerge. "He's given me away!" Erofei gasped, and stopped again, grasping at the birch paling. His heart contracted so painfully that a searing sensation spread through his whole chest. Efim Chernyavkin, his jacket open and his hands thrust in his trouser pockets, strode airily past the sentry without glancing at him. When he came up to the elder he said, with a twitch of his black brows.

"Just coming, Erofei Kuzmich? They're waiting for you in there."

"For me?" Erofei whispered, his voice breaking. "What's in there? What for?"

"As if you didn't know? Go on in, they'll tell you!"

It took Erofei some time to get through the door. To let him pass the sentry stepped to the left, and so did he. Then the sentry, with a grimace of irritation, moved to the right, and Erofei did the same. This was repeated several times. The end came when the sentry uttered a growl, grabbed Erofei by the sleeve and dragged him inside.

Kweiss greeted him coldly.

He stood leaning his plump womanish backside against the table, his feet apart as though he were preparing to wrestle. Erofei had just entered the room and removed his hat to bow when Kweiss pushed himself away from the table and, shaking back his tuft of hair, jabbed his finger at Erofei's chest.

"You are elder!" he barked. "You must say who in your fillage set fire to grain. You must say eferything. Answer!"

The pain in Erofei's chest instantly vanished. "There, thank God, it's not about that good-for-nothing!" he thought. "It's about the grain again."

"How should I know, Herr Commandant?" He screwed up his face piteously. "If I had seen it that would be another thing. I was home when the fire started. People know I was—"

"You must know!" Kweiss barked again.

"No, Herr Commandant, you can do what you like to me, but I don't know." He shook his head. "I don't know, and I can't say anything without knowing. I don't want a sin on my conscience."

Kweiss turned around abruptly and pointed to the corner.

"Did he?"

Only now did Erofei realize what had happened that morning. Osip, the storekeeper, sat slumped on the floor near the stove. His dark shirt hung in tatters revealing purple welts on his body. His face was scratched and his grey moustache bloody. His eyes beneath their shaggy frowning brows were filled with anguish and restrained fury. "Efim gave him away!" Erofei realized, his whole body turning numb. "Oh, the black soul! Condemned a man to his death, did he?" And although Erofei was angry with Osip for what the latter had said to him in front of everyone out in the collective-farm yard, yet,

realizing that death threatened the storekeeper, he replied firmly.

"I don't know. I didn't see it, and if I didn't see it, how can I say? I haven't much longer to live—"

"He is Bolshefik?"

"And he was never a Bolshevik, Herr Commandant," Erofei answered still more firmly. "That I know for sure. He was all for the collective farm, it's true, but as for joining the Bolsheviks—no, he didn't. I won't have a sin on my conscience, no matter what. . . ."

Osip raised his eyes to Erofei and his blood-flecked moustache quivered.

"Forgive me, Erofei, before I die," he said, breathing painfully. "I thought badly of you. . . ." His eyes lost their flash of fury for a moment.

Kweiss did not understand what the storekeeper had said.

"What?" he shouted. "What did you say? Answer!"

Osip looked at the Commandant and said intensely through his teeth, "Stop your barking, you dog!" He waved his hand at Erofei. "He doesn't know anything!" Then he added quietly, "I'm a Bolshevik, been one a long time."

"Oho!" Kweiss exclaimed in triumph with a glance at his soldiers standing near the window. "He confessed. He is a Bolshefik!" In his puffy face his tiny grease spots of eyes floated upward. "Oho!" he exclaimed again. He turned and started to speak to the soldiers in German.

Meanwhile Erofei edged up to the storekeeper. "What's the matter with you, Osip Mikhailovich? Are you in your right mind? Why did you say that about yourself? Tired of living? You were never a Bolshevik. The whole village knows that!"

"Openly I wasn't," said Osip. "But in my heart I was, Erofei Kuzmich, that's the thing."

"In your heart?"

"Yes. For a very long time."

Erofei made a wry face. "You're done for, Osip!"

"I know."

The Germans had dragged Osip to the Commandant's office early that morning. All the morning he had stubbornly denied setting fire to the grain and had endured the beatings with clenched teeth. But a few moments before Erofei came in, he had realized from Kweiss's enraged face that there was no escape; someone in Olkhovka had to pay the penalty for the burning of the grain. He knew that no one in the village, not even Efim Chernyavkin, would think of accusing Anfissa Logova. Burning stacks was a man's job. If he continued to be stubborn the Germans would in all likelihood seize and murder totally innocent people, and perhaps many of them, at that. With the composure of a man who knows that he is doing his duty, Osip decided to take all the blame upon himself, the more so since Efim Chernyavkin had pointed him out as the guilty one. "I'll be the only one to suffer," he thought, "and that'll be the end of the matter. I'm not afraid to die, I've seen death in my time!" After coming to this decision Osip experienced peace of heart and mind.

Kweiss finished giving instructions to his soldiers and turned again to the storekeeper.

"You are Bolshefik! You set fire to the grain!" he shouted.

"Yes, I am, and I set fire to the grain," said Osip, throwing his head back against the wall so that he could look straight into the Commandant's eyes. "I dragged over kerosene, poured it on the stacks, and set fire to them! And now, you filthy swine, do what you like with me!"

An hour later the Germans herded people from all over the village to the green. It was a calm, overcast day. There had been a heavy rainfall at dawn, and the

roofs and trees were still dripping. Everything was soaked and seemed weighed down to the earth. It was so misty that even from the lofty Olkhovka hill-top the countryside looked strange and unfamiliar.

Anfissa was one of the last to reach the square. Like everyone else, she knew Osip had been arrested, but she could not understand why. Knowing that she herself had set fire to the grain, in the simplicity of her heart she could not imagine that someone else might be accused of it. And so she decided it was because he had been an active member of the collective farm. That is what she told all the women who came to see her that morning. She comforted them with assurances that the Germans could not harm an old and crippled man like Osip, even though he had been active in the collective farm; but in her heart of hearts she feared the worst. When everybody was ordered to appear on the square she realized that Osip was to be executed.

As she made her way through the silent, downcast crowd of villagers toward the birches, Anfissa caught sight of Erofei. He stood with his hat pulled down over his eyes.

"Kinsman!" Anfissa said. "What's going on?"

"Osip is done for, kinswoman," Erofei whispered hoarsely into her ear. "Looks as though Efim gave him away. Then Osip confessed. I was there and heard him say it."

"What did he confess? When?"

But Erofei did not have a chance to answer. German voices came from the Commandant's office. A murmur ran through the crowd and it parted, like water before the prow of a fast cutter. Down the passage that had been formed from the Commandant's office to the birches ran a German soldier waving his arms. He was followed by Kweiss, clumping along heavily in his hobnailed boots, like a cart horse. He walked abstractedly, as though

going to prayers. Behind him came two soldiers leading Osip by the arms. He was barefoot and in a tattered shirt. Everybody saw the purple welts, like burns, on his body. The Germans need not have led him by the arms. He went freely, although walking without his stick was difficult. His eyes were fixed on the birches, whose intertwining branches and scanty, faded leaves screened from his sight the sombre eastern sky. Behind him the crowd closed in again, but very slowly: the villagers kept looking down fearfully at the uneven marks left by Osip's bare feet in the damp, muddy earth.

Anfissa lost sight of Erofei. Again she found herself at the back of the crowd and could not make out what was going on under the birches where Osip had been led. But then she saw the bulky figure of Commandant Kweiss, gaudy with ribbons and buttons, mount a kind of platform. His loud barking voice resounded above the crowd. Anfissa's heart was beating so hard and there was such a noise in her ears that she could not distinguish a single word. She began to tug at the shoulders of the women standing beside her.

"What's he saying there, women? What's he saying?"

"About Osip," they answered. "For setting fire to the grain."

"The grain?" she screamed.

"Says it was him who set fire to it. . . ."

Anfissa's lips trembled and turned white.

"Let me through!" she shouted weakly, and started to push her way forward. "Let me through! Let me through!" she kept repeating. "Let me through!"

Before she could get near the birches Anfissa heard Osip's voice. He stood on the spot where Kweiss had stood, leaning forward, and his pose was the same as when speaking about a controversial point at a collective-farm meeting. With every abrupt movement his tattered shirt fluttered.

"Yes, I set fire to the collective-farm grain. I did it! By myself!" he shouted hurriedly while the Germans fussed with the noose. "I set fire to it so that not a single grain, as our Comrade Stalin told us, should be left for these"—he gestured at the men behind him—"these murderers of the human race! I set fire to it, yes, I did it!"

"O-osip!" called Anfissa as loudly as her weakened voice would let her, "Osip!" and tried to push forward.

Osip raised his grey blood-flecked moustache and cast his eyes over the crowd to find Anfissa. The stirring of the crowd showed him where she was, and he flung his hand up. His ragged sleeve slid to his shoulder.

"Stop, women!" he shouted, trying to divert attention from Anfissa by addressing all the women. "Don't interfere, don't wail!" When he saw that Anfissa had quietened down, he said slowly and sternly, as he had never spoken before, "Let me die like a man, the way our Bolshevik comrades died for us in the days of the tsar!"

The noose was thrown round his neck from behind.

". . . They think they can conquer us Russians!" he cried, pulling at the noose with both hands. "They can never conquer us!" he shouted once more, and dropped.

Anfissa did not see and could not understand what happened next. The Germas round the birches broke into shouts, and a few seconds later Osip again appeared on the platform. Pulling at the noose round his neck, he cried out, but now his voice was hoarse and his breath came in painful gasps.

"When our men come back they'll hang you better, you murderers! The rope won't snap! And our men will come back!" The crowd swayed and groaned. Osip spoke still faster now, knowing that he had only a few seconds to live. "Before death, women, one sees the future clearly! Never will these damned creatures. . . . Never! Soviet power—"

Again he dropped, without finishing. The crossbar sagged under his weight and the birches trembled, showering the earth with a rain of large drops from their drooping branches.

As in a dream Anfissa heard voices round her:

"Oh, the murderers!"

"The devils!"

"They've hanged him!"

"Hanged him?" Anfissa asked in a strange voice, turning and not recognizing the women round her. She still could not believe it had happened. "Hanged him?" she repeated, looking from side to side. "Why, they've hanged him, hanged him!" she suddenly cried out with such force and anguish that everything turned black before her eyes.

Only then, it seemed, did the villagers realize what had happened. With cries and groans they scattered from the birches in all directions.

* XXIII *

Immediately after the execution of Osip, Commandant Kweiss summoned Erofei and announced the tax he was imposing on Olkhovka. Within three days the villagers were to supply the German army with eighty tons of grain and several score head of horses, cows and other livestock.

Erofei knew perfectly well what the villagers had, and realized at once that the tax was far too heavy and absolutely impossible to collect. "What's this? Why, it's plain robbery!" he thought, feeling something inside him snap. "If this tax is collected the whole village will die off before spring! What are they doing?" Standing there before Kweiss, Erofei immediately decided with his customary firmness that under no condition would he go round collecting that ruinous tax. He did not want to be

the one to blame for such a terrible calamity. He knew that the people, no matter who was in power, would never forgive him such an evil deed. "Living on an ant-hill would be no worse," he thought. "And it would most likely cost me my head." Pulling himself together, he calmly and firmly told Kweiss he would inform the villagers about the tax, but that he would not be able to collect it. After all, he said, he was old and ill; it would be hard for him to do so much walking, and there would be a lot of walking to do.

"Look out, elder!" Kweiss threatened. "Ill?"

"Herr Commandant," Erofei implored, "you can see for yourself! I'm an old man. Tax collecting and all those other things! My legs aren't strong. I ought to have gone to the doctor's a long time ago. I've knocked myself up properly. Can't you see? I'm like a worm-eaten mushroom—that's what I'm like! Don't know what keeps me going."

Erofei hunched his shoulders and drew himself together until he looked so small and frail that to cheer him up Kweiss said, "My soldier will help. You understand, yes?"

Erofei waved his hat. "Look at the size of the village! You have to trapes all round it. How can I do that?"

After a moment's thought Kweiss found a way out.

He proposed that the elder appoint two assistants from among the villagers.

"They will be *polizei*," Kweiss explained.

Erofei agreed immediately. "That's a different matter!"

They quickly found one man to serve as *polizei*. That was Efim Chernyavkin. But no matter how Erofei racked his brains he could not think of anybody else in Olkhovka for the job. Promising, however, to find a suitable person, he tottered out of the Commandant's office, groaning as he went.

On his way home he stopped for a moment at Lukeria Boyarkina's. Calling her out into the passage he first asked about Anfissa.

"Don't know how she is, do you? After all, she's a relative of mine; I'm worried about her. And I just haven't the time now to drop in there."

"She's bad, Kuzmich," Lukeria sobbed. "We had to carry her home. She's lying there dead to the world and I don't know if she'll recover."

"Why did she act like that, eh? You see, it's awkward for me to butt in. Why did she take on more than anybody else about Osip?"

"I don't know, Kuzmich. I just can't imagine."

"I see," Erofei hesitated. "I've come to see you, Lukeria, about something that's very important and secret. Anfissa can't do it at the moment, so I want you to tell all the women.... Go and tell them straightaway: women, hide your grain, hide it as best you can, before it's too late." He leaned towards Lukeria and explained: "They've put a terrible tax on us! They'll pick the village clean! Tomorrow they'll probably start searching the barns. It'll be a bad job for those who haven't got their grain hidden."

Lukeria fell back against the door-post. "Oh, Erofei!"

"Mind you don't give me away!" Erofei said with a quick glance at Lukeria. "I'm looking out for the interests of the whole collective farm. Perhaps they'll still have time to hide the stuff, those who haven't already. And if anyone mentions me—well, Lukeria, then I'll be up beside Osip. So be careful!"

At the gate he was met by Loznevoi, who humbly opened it for him and then started to explain with energetic waving of the arms and mimicry that he had done all the jobs he had been given. Erofei halted and, closing the gate himself, surveyed Loznevoi more attentively than he had for some time. The latter was thin and stooped,

a straggly beard covered his chin, and he was dressed in a worn peasant's coat and dirty old bast shoes. A pitiful sight, he looked like one of those Tartar ragmen who used to poke about rubbish dumps and backyards in the old times collecting discarded junk. But still, just occasionally, the steely glint Erofei remembered so well from their first meeting would flicker in his eyes. "What he's come to!" Erofei thought with a shudder of disgust. "Now there's only one thing left for him."

"What are you trying to show me? What's the matter? What are you waving your arms for?" Erofei spoke in his usual blustering tone, pretending he could not understand Loznevoi. "Speak up! Well?" Suddenly he added, "It's all the same now."

Loznevoi's eyes grew round and he froze to the spot.

"Speak?" he whispered. His arms dropped to his sides. "Erofei Kuzmich!" He thrust his pointed little Tartar beard forward. "What's happened?"

"What was to have been expected," Erofei answered sternly. "They've given you away, that's what!"

"Me? Given me away? Who?"

"That I don't know. Somebody did, anyhow. Who was it gave our storekeeper away? And somebody gave you away too. I warned you. Remember?"

"Erofei Kuzmich!"

"I don't know how the Lord saved me, that I don't," Erofei continued without heeding Loznevoi. Then, as though recalling what he had recently gone through, he closed his eyes and shook his beard mournfully, "Jumped at me like a beast, he did. I thought he'd tear me limb from limb on the spot. He wanted to send for you there and then and string you up on the birches. That's how it was!"

Loznevoi swayed. His face worked and his eyes became glazed, as though he were drunk. "Erofei Kuzmich!" he kept whispering soundlessly.

"All right, stop your whining!" Erofei shouted. "The Lord saved me and I saved you. Stood up for you and practically snatched you out of the noose. I wonder now if you'll remember what I've done for you. Why should the man die, I thought. No, I said, he's not that kind, he's against the Bolsheviks and their rule."

Tears streamed down Loznevoi's cheeks.

"Yes, yes! That's right," he whispered, looking at Erofei wildly.

"And he ran away from their army, I said."

"Yes, yes, that's right—"

"Why, I said, kill a man for no good reason?"

"Erofei Kuzmich!" Loznevoi moaned, only now realizing that he was saved. He made a move to throw himself on his knees before Erofei, but the latter restrained him.

"Stop that, you! Let me finish, and if you're not a pig you'll thank me when the time comes. Bowing and scraping isn't what I need." Now he even took Loznevoi by his coat sleeves. "*He* said: 'if he serves I'll pardon him, if not I'll hang him!' "

"As what? How?"

"Join that—what do they call it—*polizei*!" Erofei ordered sternly. "You'll be helping me. It's a decent job. He didn't understand me when I tried to tell him you were deaf and dumb, so don't be afraid to talk to him. I'll take you over to him myself. Whatever he says, agree on the spot. There's nothing else you can do now."

"I didn't want that," Loznevoi whispered dejectedly. "All I want is to keep alive until the war ends."

"I dare say there are lots of things you didn't want! But fate makes you do them. No, this doesn't seem to be the time to hide from your fate. So dress up and we'll go soon."

Late that afternoon Erofei presented Loznevoi to Kweiss. Loznevoi returned from the Commandant's office with a complete German outfit and, above all, a white

band to tie round his arm. The door of the best room was ajar, and through it Erofei observed Loznevoi with interest. First he stood before the mirror, holding up the grey, snake-coloured German tunic to his chest. Then he sank on to the box, where his new clothing lay, and sat there a long time, his shoulders shaking. . . .

The next morning Erofei did not get out of bed.

His wife fussed round the stove for a long time, waiting for him to get up. Then she asked in the cold tone she had been using to her husband of late, "What are you lying there for? Think yourself a great man now, eh?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" Erofei answered with a groan. "Better steam up some bran. I'm aching in every bone. Oh, Lord, I can't see a thing. It must be this damn weather!"

Loznevoi and Chernyavkin had to make the rounds of the houses without him to collect the tax levied by the Germans. From that day on the two *polizei*, accompanied by Germans, roamed about the village from morning to night. They searched all the barns and storerooms and took every scrap of grain the collective farmers had, as well as taking their livestock, poultry and the vegetables laid aside for the winter. From morning to night the yards resounded with swearing, shouts and the wailing of women.

Cold, rainy weather closed in on the world.

Everything wept and the heavens wept too.

PART THREE

* I *

In a dark fir wood on the other side of the Vazuza Captain Ozerov called a long halt. It was a calm, sunny day. Far away to the east, where the war had rolled on, artillery was crashing heavily, but in the wood an autumnal stillness reigned. The squirrels laboured gaily, rummaging among the fir needles and gnawing at cones, as they fitted up their nests for the winter. The busy tomtits kept up an incessant twitter in the undergrowth. Slowly and meditatively the birches dropped their yellow leaves about them, one by one, like a player laying out a game of patience; they seemed to be telling their fortunes with the leaves.

As Captain Ozerov had expected, all day long men from the regiment who were making their way east drifted into this large wood. Look-outs stationed at many points along the river met them and led them to the camp. The first to appear, almost in full strength, were the companies from the left flank of the defence line. The deliberate, phlegmatic Captain Zhuravsky had fought on longer than all the rest and had managed to preserve his battalion better than the others. Then small groups from the distant right flank began to appear. They brought the news that Battalion Commander Bolotin had been killed, and that the Commissar of the regiment had taken over command of One Battalion. Finally the main body of One Battalion arrived, led in strict formation by Yakhno himself. To everybody's surprise and joy, by evening more than half the riflemen of the regiment had assembled in Ozerov's forest camp.

The meeting between Ozerov and Yakhno raised everyone's spirits.

As is the case with most people after their first battle, an indefinable change had come into Yakhno's face—some added wrinkles, or perhaps it was that his eyes, which had seen death, had lost their former brightness. But, as usual, he looked young and cheerful. In the olive-green soldier's padded jacket for which he had changed his greatcoat just before the battle he seemed even trimmer and lighter on his feet than before. The men eagerly sprang to their feet and saluted him as he passed them. Then they gathered in knots and talked.

"Now the Commissar's here too."

"You know, chaps, I feel better somehow when he's with us."

"Perhaps things'll pick up for us now."

When he met Ozerov, Yakhno quickly seized both his hands in his, squeezed them as hard as he could and shook them for a long time, a smile playing on his open, youth-

ful face. Noticing the bandage on Ozerov's head he quickly asked, "Lightly?"

"Just a scratch."

"I knew we should meet!" Yakhno exclaimed, still holding Ozerov's hands. Then, remembering how they had parted before the battle, when the Captain had somehow lingered for a long time, holding the little autumn flower he had picked, he said, "I believed in this! Did you?"

"Yes, I did," Ozerov answered in embarrassment, noticing that the men had crowded around them and were listening to their conversation.

"Well, I congratulate you, Captain!" Yakhno shook Ozerov's hands again. "I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart!" Then he, too, noticed the men around, and, dropping Ozerov's hands at last, went on more loudly than he need have done: "Anyway, the regiment did its job. True, we paid a heavy price for it. But the first success, even if it's a small one, always costs a lot. Now we know that we can delay the Germans. And once we know that, we'll stop them!"

Yakhno and Ozerov walked all through the camp, talking with the men on the way, and came out to a clearing carpeted with fern leaves of patterned gold. They went into the golden sea up to their knees and stopped.

"I'm very, very glad you've come, Comrade Commissar," Ozerov said. "Voloshin—you know?"

"Yes, I know."

There was a moment's silent grief between them, then Yakhno spoke. "You are the one to command the regiment, and no one else!"

"But you're the Commissar. Why not the two of us?"

"Good. On paper, it will be the two of us," Yakhno agreed. "But actually it will be you alone. You have earned the right to. And I shall be there to help you. You see, I am not one of those who are out for power. At a time like this one has to be especially honest in

one's attitude towards power." He paused. "I am convinced that there should be only one commander in a military unit. With plenty of authority and plenty of brains! A battle is first of all a contest of brains, and then of arms. A commander must think and think!"

Ozerov smiled. His eyes shone a clear summer blue.

"But for the time being we have to put our heads together," he said. "Two heads are better than one, they say. And especially at a tough time like this."

Yakhno pushed his cap back, and a few damp locks of blond hair fell on to his forehead.

"Shall we discuss what to do?" he asked with a glance at Ozerov.

"Yes."

They went farther on, leaving a broad trail behind them; a flutter passed through the fern leaves almost all over the clearing.

"We were crossing the Vazuza just now," Yakhno's voice changed suddenly, "and you know the kind of pebbles there are there? They just dazzle you. I collected a whole pocketful!" He drew a handful of coloured pebbles from his pocket. "See? Simply wonderful! They're for my son. As soon as we reach our lines I'll send them home to him. He's terribly keen on collecting little stones."

... That night all those gathered in Ozerov's forest camp had a good rest. In the morning there was a staff order appointing Senior Lieutenant Golovko, the commander of a reconnaissance platoon, Commander of One Battalion in place of the late Captain Bolotin. The officers and men of Loznevoi's battalion were distributed among the various small units temporarily, until the regiment should emerge from enemy-held territory. At noon there was a review of the regiment. The two rifle battalions and the small units lined up in a broad clearing. When the order "Att-en-tion!" rang out, and when the regimental battle colours were unfurled, all in

gold embroidery and thick fringe, everybody felt a thrill—the thrill which always comes when on review—pass through the ranks like an electric current, and everybody realized that the regiment was saved and was again beginning to live according to the familiar rules of army life.

That day autumn shut down on them. The sky was overcast. Fallen leaves swept noisily through the wood. Shortly after the review ended, dark clouds gathered overhead, and then, hesitatingly, a slow autumn drizzle began to fall.

And again the men became despondent. They gathered in groups under the spreading fir and talked in low, anxious voices.

"Well, we're all together, but what's the good?"

"Yes, autumn's here. It's a hell of a day."

"It'll start pouring, and then where'll we go?"

"The weather's enough to rot your guts!"

Commissar Yakhno immediately sensed that the bad weather was quickly dampening the mood into which the men had been roused by the review. After talking it over with Ozerov he summoned Political Instructor Voznyakov, the regiment Party organizer. Voznyakov, who was stouter than he should have been at his age, came up with the leisurely gait of a civilian, clasping a yellow leather map case stuffed to overflowing with papers.

"Listed all the Communists?" Yakhno asked him.

"Every one." Voznyakov fingered the case.

"Get them together at once."

The Communists gathered in a sheltered spot under a clump of old firs a little way from the camp. While waiting for Yakhno and Ozerov they gloomily discussed the weather. Voznyakov laid his map case on his knees and was studying some papers he had spread out on it. Every now and then big drops fell on them from the branches.

"Oh, damn!" Voznyakov exclaimed. "How can I take down the minutes here?" He looked round. "Anybody shaking the branches?"

"Nobody's shaking them," answered Yurgin behind him. "It drips right through."

Degtyarev gave a shiver. "Yes, it's rotten weather. Wonder if it's come to stay."

"Not half it has," a knowing voice put in.

And under each fir it started again:

"Look how dark it's getting!"

"Now it's really going to pour! And we're miles off the beaten track here!"

"Even a dog wouldn't be out in weather like this."

Yakhno and Ozerov appeared. They walked side by side over the wet grass, making no effort to protect themselves from the rain. A short distance from the spot where the meeting was to take place they stopped, talked for a moment and then burst out laughing, as only men who are confident of themselves can laugh. Everybody was amazed by this laughter. They fell into puzzled silence.

"Nasty weather, isn't it?" Yakhno said gaily. He was the first to come under the trees.

The answers were slow and depressed:

"Autumn, Comrade Commissar."

"It's come to stay this time!"

"No getting away from it; the weather's bad."

"Bad?" Yakhno said with an ironical smile. "But, comrades, this is wonderful weather! All day yesterday I dreamed of weather like this. Gosh, I thought, if only the rains set in! It's high time they came. Let it rain for a week, even two. And now I've got just what I wanted." He turned to Ozerov, who was shaking the water from his cap. "Isn't it marvellous, Comrade Regiment Commander, that this weather has clamped down at last?"

"It's very good," Ozerov answered in a serious tone.

"Yesterday," Yakhno continued, smiling, "I must say

I was a bit depressed too, when I looked at the sky. How long is this Indian summer going to last, I asked myself. But today my heart really feels much lighter. Look how the sky is covered over. That means we're in for a long spell. A week or more of it. Yes, we're very lucky! Very lucky indeed!"

Everybody listened in amazed silence. Then a stocky sergeant in a wet and crumpled forage cap poked his head out from behind a nearby fir-tree and asked distrustfully:

"Comrade Commissar, what do you like about all this wetness? We'll rot on the stalk in weather like this!"

"What do I like about it?" Yakhno surveyed the Sergeant, and his customary smile gave way to a stern expression. "The fact that it helps us in the war, Comrade Sergeant! At the moment it's helping our troops to hold back the Germans." He glanced round swiftly. "Our troops are getting stauncher every day, in spite of the losses. Everywhere they are starting to crack into the enemy and bring him up short. Nowadays even in dry weather it's hard for the Germans to advance. How are they going to in such mud? The roads all around here are bad, and there are forests and marshes. . . . How far are they going to get in this mud with all their heavy equipment? Half their tanks and guns will get stuck in the marshes for good, and there will be bottle-necks on all the roads and at all the river crossings. And that will be the end of their offensive!"

The Communists no longer heeded the rain; they emerged from their shelters and gathered quietly round the fir-tree where the Commissar stood.

"So you see," Yakhno continued, striving for the tone one uses in private conversations and not at meetings, "the worse the weather the better for us. The heavier it rains the lighter our hearts should be. While the Germans are bogged down in the marshes we will get out of the area they occupy and join up with our

forces. I am certain that it will not be long now! And that is why, Comrade Sergeant, I like such weather. All the men in the regiment should like it."

Many of the Communists lowered their heads guiltily.

"It's hard for us too, isn't it?" Yakhno asked, screwing up his eyes. "Drips down your collar, doesn't it? Makes your feet wet. But are we worse men than our fathers and grandfathers?"

"It's quite clear, Comrade Commissar," Matvei Yurgin answered moodily but resolutely. "We'll go on without any more talk. We're used to this kind of weather."

"The mud isn't anything terrible, of course," came a voice from behind the tree. "The bad part of it is we're cut off."

"Who said we're cut off?" Ozerov suddenly barked. "Who's that behind the fir? Here, come on out!"

The Communists parted to let him pass, and the Sergeant in the wet and crumpled forage cap stepped forward. Ozerov shook his finger at him.

"Forget that idiotic word! Once and for all! Do you hear?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain!"

"Forget it!" Ozerov shouted. He turned to the others and spoke in his usual brusque, assertive tone, "Anyone who uses that idiotic word will pay for it with his head. Remember that! Who invented that word? Cowards did!" Then, without realizing that he was repeating a thought he had read in *War and Peace*, he said, "That word has no meaning. You can cut off a slice of bread but you can't cut off an army. It is impossible to cut off an army, to bar its path, because there is always plenty of space all round and a new path can always be found. And then there is the night, when nothing is visible. Cut off, indeed!" Again Ozerov shook his finger at the Sergeant. "I don't want to hear that rotten word again. You Communists must see to it that not a single soldier uses it.

And during the march you must set an example by your courage, endurance and cheerfulness. It won't be easy going—it's no use hiding the fact—but then, what does come easy in war?"

Political Instructor Voznyakov decided that it was time to open the meeting. He edged up to Yakhno and asked in a whisper, "Shall we begin, Comrade Commissar? Everyone's here. Altogether there's—just a minute—"

"What meeting?" Yakhno interrupted him. "The meeting's already over."

Voznyakov dropped his paper-filled hands in consternation.

"Over? Why—what about the minutes?"

"We'll get along without minutes."

Yakhno gave other instructions. Five minutes later the Communists went back to the camp, and some lively talking started under those fir-trees. . . .

* II *

Two days later the regiment set out.

Behind the German front line all sorts of headquarters, service units and reserves were moving along the main roads leading to Moscow. The incessant rumble of German tanks and heavy lorries, the roar of motor cycles and the clatter of wagons hung over the main roads. Passing enemy units were billeted in the villages along the roads, and in any other villages that were accessible. Commandant's offices and garrisons were hastily set up in the district centres and other small towns.

Ozerov's regiment had only one course: to avoid the main roads and all places occupied by the Germans, and push east through the fields, forests and marshes. This involved almost no danger; not even the noises of war penetrated there. At first, before they became accustomed

to their new status and were still apprehensive, the men liked the cross-country march, but soon they all realized that the going would be very difficult indeed.

From day to day the weather grew worse. The rain poured down unceasingly; it was as though during the summer the sky had rusted into holes. The countryside turned into a sea of mud through which the men waded knee-deep. The forests were inundated as during the spring floods; inside them it was dark, and the air was heavy and stagnant. The men were forced to abandon all the wagons and even their light carts in the impassable marshes.

But even without the carts and heavy equipment the going was slow. The bad roads and the weather wore the men out. A lot of time was taken up on reconnaissance. They moved ahead at various awkward times, depending upon the circumstances: at dawn, in the evening, during the night. There was little to eat. They had no food with them and had to content themselves with what they managed to obtain in the half-deserted forest settlements they occasionally passed through. It was a case of punching new holes in their belts. On top of everything else, the nights were turning cold. They would awaken from a sleep of dead exhaustion to find themselves frozen to the ground together with their simple pallets of fir branches or straw. Nor was it always possible to warm up; even fire was powerless in the face of the damp and rain that engulfed the countryside. At the end of a week's marching many were so weak they could scarcely keep on their feet. It was a bitter sight to look at the men who marched behind Ozerov and Yakhno. They were emaciated, feverish-eyed and shivering, in uniforms scorched at the campfires and plastered with mud. But they marched on and on, gloomy and silent.

At last the regiment entered the territory of Moscow Region, south of Volokolamsk. Here the fields were larger,

the ground firmer underfoot; there were more villages, and in the forests and groves of mixed trees it was light and pleasant. Here the going became much easier. It also became much more dangerous. The scouts encountered the enemy everywhere. German units were billeted permanently in almost all the villages. In many places the Germans had set up storehouses, temporary garages and filling stations. By the sides of the roads lay wrecked or stranded German tanks and overturned carts and lorries. And as far as the eye could see big and small columns of smoke rose, fading into the overcast sky.

Ozerov's men realized that the German offensive had been halted and that the front was not far off. One morning a distinct boom of guns floated over from the east. They all heard it. As they listened, many of the men had tears in their eyes.

The same evening they met a column of Germans while crossing a main road. Here they fought their first skirmish. They set several German lorries on fire and killed a large number of Germans. They themselves were surprised at the way they had fought and what they had achieved. They all saw that despite its losses and the difficult march their regiment had become stronger and braver and more co-ordinated in battle.

* III *

The earth, tightened up by the sudden cold, became as hard as stone. Now frozen stiff, everything on it—the flattened grass, the moss, the fallen leaves—crackled and rustled underfoot. A keen ear could determine at a distance that hundreds of people were moving through the forest.

The men kept close to the edge of the forest. Where it thinned out they could see, to their right, patches of fields, rain-blackened haystacks, bare trees topping the

low hills. Farther away, beyond the hills, rose wisps of smoke. The sun was setting. In the heart of the forest it was already deep twilight, but in the clearings, where the light was better, the solitary firs were crimson in the afterglow. In places where the trees were thin, the raw blast pierced the men to the bone. They would turn their faces away, pull their forage caps down over their ears, hunch up in their dirty, ragged greatcoats, press close to one another, and make an even louder clatter with their boots on the frozen ground. The majority walked in silence, intent only on trying to keep warm. Many coughed—a hollow cough that racked their chilled chests.

Two hundred yards in front of the regiment moved a patrol headed by Commissar Yakhno, carefully reconnoitring the unfamiliar terrain. The rifle battalions marched in close order; then, in one body, came the officers and men of all small units. In the centre of this body six men bore three stretchers: on one lay Tseluiko, the Regiment Commander's adjutant, who was seriously ill, and on the others, two men who had been severely wounded in the skirmish on the main road. The walking wounded and the sick plodded along near by, frequently groaning and clutching at trees or their comrades for support. Tseluiko was carried by Andrei and Umrikhin. Andrei was in front. Now, in a padded jacket and boots, with a little old fur hat he had found in a deserted roadside hut perched on the back of his big head, and a hunter's knife and two grenades hanging from his belt, he looked more like a hunter than a soldier. He held the ends of the birch poles in a savage grip at his sides. His back was bent and he let out hoarse sighs as he walked along, often tripping over roots and bumps in the ground. This seemed to puzzle Umrikhin.

"Giving up already?" he asked finally.

"Keep going!" Andrei answered hoarsely.

But the next instant he staggered so violently that he almost dropped his end of the stretcher. Umrikhin adjusted himself to Andrei's new stride and asked worriedly, "What's the matter with you, Andrei? Feel all right?"

"I can't see properly," Andrei admitted.

"Not night-blindness, is it?"

"No, it isn't that. . . ."

"Because this is just the time for it—the evening. And it's easy to get. Hardly anything to eat."

"It's not that!" Andrei repeated irritably. "Once you get hold of an idea, you can't forget it! Come on!"

Umrikhin's amazement grew. "Look at that! Your nerves gone too? That's queer!"

For about an hour Tseluiko had lain unconscious, but now he began to rave again. Unable to raise his feverish head, he seized the stretcher pole with his right hand and cried weakly, "Yes, spring is here, spring!"

"You're a little mixed up, my boy," Umrikhin rejoined gently. "A spring like this can be the death of a man. My empty guts are freezing together. My God, stop throwing your arm around! You'll lose your mitten and freeze your hand stiff. What are you tossing about for? A sick man ought to lie quiet. Look how quiet Stepan Dyatlov is lying there. Well, you just do the same!"

"And how wonderful everything is!" Tseluiko went on.

"Why, it's even better than wonderful!" Umrikhin remarked sarcastically. He wrinkled up his weather-beaten face and shook his big head, which his forage cap barely covered. "Wandering around our own country like animals. Worn out and ragged like I don't know what. Look at the coat on me! The only reason it's holding together is that the mud pasted it and then it froze. Stop waving your hand there! What do you think this is, a meeting?"

"Ivan, shut up!" Andrei begged.

"But what's he babbling for?"

"Let him. But you shut up."

"No, I've never known—I've never known such happiness. . . ." Tseluiko muttered indistinctly but with emotion.

"There, you see!" Umrikhin hastened to continue the conversation. "He sticks to his point. He's found happiness!"

Andrei almost jerked the stretcher poles out of Umrikhin's hands. Umrikhin missed a step, and glanced at Andrei. Still holding the stretcher, the latter now stood leaning against the rough trunk of a thick birch.

"You'll drop him!" Umrikhin cried.

"Let me take a rest," Andrei begged. "I'm burning all over."

"Burning? Here, put it down."

They set the stretcher on the ground. Tseluiko continued to rave—all about spring and a girl he knew. Umrikhin could not restrain himself. "What a talker!" he exclaimed.

Andrei leaned back against the birch trunk and opened the collar of his padded jacket. Umrikhin looked into his face. Like the others, Andrei had grown thin and haggard during the march. His cheeks and chin were covered with a lank stubble. Sweat was streaming from his temples.

"You too?" Umrikhin whispered.

A knot of men formed round them.

"Why the halt? Want a change?"

"It's Andrei there—"

"What's the matter?"

"I—nothing—" Andrei gasped. "I—"

"He's ill," Umrikhin explained. "Burning all over."

"Somebody ought to take his place."

"No, I'll carry it," said Andrei, bending down to pick

up the stretcher. "It doesn't matter. I'll carry it myself. I've cooled off now. I feel all right."

"You'll drop him."

Andrei wheeled about. "Ivan, keep quiet! How many more times!"

"That's it, he's ruined his nerves too," Umrikhin explained to the men. "See? Just say a word and he flies off the handle."

They started off again. Andrei felt that with each step it was becoming more and more difficult to carry the stretcher, but he walked on and on, struggling with all his waning strength to fight down the fever. At times everything turned so black before his eyes that he lost sight of the men ahead of him and blundered into trees. But he walked on, never letting go of the thought that he must push east. . . .

Andrei was a person with a clear, direct mind, a man of simple and firm decisions. The moment he saw that he, like the others, had to go east and join up with the army, he embraced this idea fully and irrevocably. During the days of the march he had changed greatly. As he passed through the places the Germans had occupied he realized with all his heart and soul the immense calamity that had befallen his country. He had been horrified when he saw how evil and merciless men can be. Now he felt that the peace of mind he had known from childhood no longer existed. He lived inwardly through the same trouble and anxiety that his native land was living through. These changes showed themselves in his behaviour: he was now less compliant and good-natured, carried himself more boldly among his comrades, spoke in an incisive, and sometimes even rough, voice, and his movements were quick and energetic and nervous. There was a storm slowly gathering within him.

Dusk deepened rapidly. To the right of the winding path along which the regiment was moving, a dense

thicket of young firs completely hid the fields from view. On the left a big marsh overgrown with reeds and grass came into sight; here and there stunted birches and frail alders rose out of the hummocks. A biting wintry wind blew from the swamp. The birches and alders writhed in anguish; from afar they seemed to be fleeing before the deadly piercing cold of the forest wind. The frozen reeds rustled unceasingly, and the dry marsh grass drifted down among the hummocks.

Their boots clattering on the frozen earth, Ozerov's men marched on, bending against the wind. They blew on their hands and rubbed their ears. Many tried to limber up, crunching through the ice in the puddles and tearing their clothes on the underbrush in the dark. Occassionally snatches of phrases and words rose from the plodding column:

"Winter?"

"Be here soon."

"Enough to freeze you stiff!"

"Raw! Is it raw!"

Tseluiko was restless. He kept describing something wonderful in an excited voice. Umrikhin no longer talked to him. He was busy watching Andrei walk, and more and more frequently he begged him, "Hey, careful there! You'll fall!" And to himself he muttered, "That's luck for you. What a thing to happen now!"

Umrikhin's arms had been numb for a long time. His fingers were stiff with cold. He wanted to be relieved at the stretcher and mentioned it more than once, but either Andrei did not hear or he paid no attention. Andrei walked on and on, wheezing as he dragged his feet over the hummocky ground. There was a new, wild stubbornness in this strong man fighting down his fever.

"What a fellow!" Umrikhin marvelled. "Still waters do run deep! Even scares you, he does!"

Andrei walked on, drenched with sweat. He was using all his strength. His whole attention was concentrated on not weakening, on not stumbling in the dark and dropping the sick man. He scarcely noticed how his comrades were trying to protect themselves from the fierce wind. But during those few seconds when he did notice his comrades, he felt the same roar and whine of a wintry wind in his soul. . . .

He did not remember how long he carried Tseluiko, or what happened on the way. He was roused by a roaring sound in the sky. His face was covered with hay. Probably a haystack, he thought, and at first he could not for the life of him make out where the sound was coming from, although it was familiar. Could it be a storm in the forest? He sprang to his feet and, although he could not yet see anyone about, asked quickly, "What's that roaring?"

"Planes," answered someone close by.

"Bombing?"

"Flying low," the same voice answered. "To Moscow again."

Andrei lay down again. A few seconds later he realized it was Matvei Yurgin he had been talking to. Then, burying his head in the hay, he said through clenched teeth, "The swine!" He was silent for a while. Then he asked softly, "Is it far to Moscow?"

"Not now," Yurgin replied. "Feel bad?"

"Aching all over."

The roar in the sky grew fainter in the distance and died away. Suddenly, as though a stopper had been removed from his ears, Andrei heard the noise of the wind, the creaking of the trees in the dark, and, not far from the haystack, dry twigs crackling in a fire and men talking. Andrei sat up and asked, as if only now recognizing Yurgin, "Is that you, Comrade Sergeant?"

"I can see you're in a bad way," was Yurgin's reply to that. "Well, get a grip on yourself, old chap, and hold on as tight as you can. There's not much left to go now. We'll cross the front soon and join up. Then we'll take a rest, have a bath. . . ."

"I'll make it," Andrei said resolutely.

Off to the side, under some firs, camp-fires were being built up. The soldiers stood bunched round the fires, rubbing their numbed fingers over the flames. Those at the back stretched out their hands above the heads of their comrades to hold them over the crackling heaps of brushwood. Andrei understood that he had not been lying in the haystack unconscious for long; the regiment had only just halted.

"Where's Tseluiko?" he asked, with sudden anxiety.

"Everybody's on the other side of the stack."

Andrei heard Umrikhin grumbling behind the haystack, and realized that he was busy with the sick and wounded. "This is a rum do!" Andrei said to himself, surprised, and bitter. "What knocked me out like that?" And again he fell back in the hay.

In the west, from where the regiment had come, there was a heavy explosion, followed by a second and a third. The men sprang to their feet and stood motionless.

"Senseless!" Andrei said sharply.

"Why senseless?" asked Yurgin. "We have to strike whenever there's a chance. War is war! Now we've blown up a dump, and you know how many shells there are there? How many of our men could have been killed by those shells?"

"That's all true," Andrei replied. "Only the front is close, and that means there are more Germans. Suppose they come after us? What then? There's only one thing to do—move ahead quietly, like hunters. It won't be very good if they get on our trail, will it?"

For more than an hour the men sat about the camp-

fires in close circles, listening anxiously to the noises of the forest. Finally from afar came the challenges of the sentries, then voices and footsteps on the frozen ground. Captain Ozerov appeared, followed by a small group of soldiers. He wore his usual padded jacket and a peasant fur hat with ear-flaps. Ozerov advanced quickly to one of the fires. "Put it out!" he ordered with quiet urgency.

"Looks as if you're right," Yurgin remarked to Andrei.

Orders rang out. The regiment hurriedly broke camp. Soldiers filled their mess-tins with water from the near-by marsh and hastily extinguished the fires.

* IV *

Ozerov's regiment made a long march that night. It moved across open fields and along country roads where the wind whirled in fitful gusts, poking into every little burrow in the ground and whistling through the uninviting groves and over the frozen, flattened grass. The regiment avoided all villages.

At dawn they entered a wood. About a mile farther on they came to a clearing in which a small village stood hazily outlined. A charred odour floated over from the village.

Ozerov brought the group to a stop and sent a scout patrol ahead. Alone with Yakhno, he said in a whisper, "What shall we do now?"

"The men need a rest," Yakhno answered. "They can hardly stand on their feet."

"I agree. What about the wounded and the sick?"

"It'll be hard to take them further, and it's dangerous. We must try to put them up in this village."

"All right," Ozerov said. "It's a great pity, but there's no other way out. We're going to have to fight our way through."

The scouts returned. They reported that the Germans had burned half the village down and that only a handful of people were left in it. Ozerov and Yakhno decided to leave in the village only the wounded, the sick and those in a weakened condition. To be on the safe side, all the others would rest in the woods to the right and left of the village.

Day broke slowly. Streaks and faint glimmers of light flashed across the ash-grey eastern sky beyond the forest. A winter wind shook the bare trees and brought an occasional flurry of snow.

The injured and sick were put up in a large cottage at the edge of the village. By the flickering light of a small lamp Andrei and Umrikhin, acting as medical orderlies, spread rye straw, chilled through by the bitter autumn frost, over all the free floor space except the scullery. The heavily-wounded Stepan Dyatlov and the sick Tseluiko were placed in the corner farthest from the door. The men who were lightly wounded and the sick who could get along without nursing settled down nearer the door.

Stepan Dyatlov, his face yellow and drawn, lay breathing faintly and irregularly. He had been wounded in the stomach. He did not speak and his eyes, sunk in dark hollows, were closed. Tseluiko tossed in fever and continued to rave, though less often than before. He kept reaching out his right hand as if for something firm to hold on to in this world. The others groaned and shivered —they had become chilled during the night—and one of them kept grinding his teeth. The smells of the battle smoke, soldier's sweat, dirty clothing and rags soaked with blood instantly made the big room seem stuffy and crowded.

Soon the sound of snoring rose from various corners of the room. Andrei sat down on the floor beside Umrikhin, who was dozing, his head resting against the wall.

"Thank God they've quietened down a bit," Andrei remarked.

"Now their troubles are over for a while. They'll have a rest."

"Who's going to talk to the owner, eh?"

"No hurry. How do you feel yourself?"

"The aching's stopped, but my head's buzzing."

"How are your eyes?"

"Can't see well."

"Lie down and take a nap."

"I'll manage. . . ."

The owner of the house proved to be a morose reticent woman. She was tall and lean with grey hair. She kept walking back and forth in the scullery, kicking aside the hem of her long drab-coloured skirt. Her daughter, unattractive and also morose, sat beside a tub peeling potatoes. They went about their affairs silently, paying almost no attention to the newcomers. The faint light of early morning began to break through the windows, which were boarded over halfway up and stuffed with rags and tow. Now and then a gust of wind dashed snowflakes against the panes.

Andrei decided to strike up a conversation with the mistress of the house.

"Tell me," he said, "What do they call your village? We've landed here but we don't know where we are."

"Sukhaya Polyana, that's the name," the woman answered after a pause. She was poking the wood in the stove.

"Far from here to Moscow?"

"Not very."

"Were the Germans here?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" the woman answered reluctantly. "They ruined the whole village. That's not hard to see. . . ."

"Burned it down?"

"The Lord saved very little."

She folded her hands on the handle of the oven-fork and stared silently into the fire for a minute. And it was as though something she saw in the dancing flames forced her to say, without waiting for the question, "And they killed a lot of people."

The daughter stole a glance at her mother. "Mother, don't," she said softly and pleadingly.

"I'm not going to cry," her mother answered angrily. "I haven't got a single tear left. Everything's dried up inside."

She turned to face Andrei and Umrikhin.

"My husband, Pyotr Matveich, was also killed," she said simply and sternly. "He said something to them, and they tied him to one of those black tanks of theirs and set it going fast over the hummocks."

Without waiting for questions she told the story of the German reprisals against the village. She told the story laconically, avoiding all detail.

"We had a silo dug outside the village. So they drove the old men and women and the little children there—and started! Filled it to the top! And those who tried to run away—shot them down with machine-guns and crushed them with tanks. You couldn't recognize them afterwards."

A minute before, as he had finished his cigarette, Andrei had thought of lying down and taking a nap to help him fight down his illness. But now all thoughts of sleep vanished completely. How many such stories had he heard during the days of the march! What was happening now in Olkhovka? He gave a shudder as he thought of his village and home. "Perhaps the same as here."

"It's the end of our Sukhaya Polyana," the woman concluded her story. "Those who were left alive ran away

wherever they could. But we came back. We'll live here until we die. It's all the same."

"Ugh, it's enough to make you sick!" Umrikhin exclaimed with a shiver.

"But why?" Andrei asked. "Why all that slaughter, eh?"

"Because of people like you," the woman replied. Pulling out the oven-fork, she explained. "They came to us at night, men like you, our Red Army men, and we hid them in the village. In this house, though, there weren't any. The neighbours had some. But just the same they tied my Pyotr Matveich to the tank and dragged him over the hummocks!" Her voice shook. "And anybody else they could lay hands on! And then they started fires!"

"Mother!" the daughter whispered again.

"Leave me alone, I'm not going to!" she said sharply. "Now you won't squeeze a single tear out of me, not a tear. Cried myself out. Peel your potatoes! Everything's turned to stone, black stone, inside me."

The woman began to stir the wood in the stove with the oven-fork. Umrikhin and Andrei remained silent for a long time, now and then glancing up at her. It grew lighter in the hut. All the wounded and sick were asleep. Even Tseluiko had fallen silent and stopped clutching at the straw. As he pulled out his pouch again Andrei whispered in a distressed voice:

"That's bad. What are we going to do?"

"We ought to go to the Captain," Umrikhin replied.

"You go and tell him the whole story."

"Yes, this won't do," Umrikhin whispered, more to himself than to Andrei. "Not after a thing like that. Have to look for another place."

He rose and went off to find Captain Ozerov. Andrei rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it from the little kerosene

lamp, threw a glance round the room and asked, thinking only the woman would hear him, "Shall I blow out the light?"

But suddenly Stepan Dyatlov spoke up from the front corner.

"Don't," he said feebly. "Wait. . . ."

Andrei brightened. "Not asleep? Feel better?"

"Yes," Dyatlov answered. "I want to look at the light. How it flickers! I've been watching it for a long time."

He lay on the stretcher between the two birch poles, covered to his chin with a padded jacket and a greatcoat. He made not the slightest sign of wanting to move, and it seemed strange to hear a voice come from such a yellow and emaciated face. An ominous decaying odour rose from his body.

Andrei knelt beside him.

"You ought to be taken to the hospital, Stepan," he said sorrowfully.

"Go away," said Dyatlov, and then, quietly, to nobody in particular, "Why did I have to get killed?"

Andrei rose and quickly went out of the house. In just his tunic, his head bare, he stood on the steps in the bitter wind for a long time, gazing into the distance with unseeing eyes.

. . . Umrikhin returned, followed by Captain Ozerov. The Captain's padded jacket and fur hat with ear-flaps were powdered with snow. He asked the surgeon's assistant how the wounded and the sick were and then sat down at the table heavily and wearily. A bedraggled tabby cat came up to him. The woman watched him pick up the cat and stroke it with veined hands that were red from the cold. Turning to the stove he asked in a tone that sounded as though he were continuing a conversation already begun, "Well, what do you say? What do you think?" He nodded at the wounded and the sick. "Eh?" He began to stroke the cat again.

"What is there to think about?"

"Isn't there something?"

"There's nothing to think about," the woman continued sternly. "Leave them with us, that's all! How can you drag them along with you? That's not easy, is it? God willing, we'll take care of them and cure them. What kind of a life shall we have if you don't live?"

Andrei and Umrikhin were amazed at the woman's decision; they had not expected it. But Captain Ozerov took it as a matter of course. He expressed his gratitude briefly.

"Thank you, Mother. We won't forget it."

"How many are you leaving?"

"First of all, that one," Ozerov turned to the front corner. "He's badly wounded. He will have to be—"

Dyatlov suddenly stirred.

"Me?" he said hoarsely. "Leave me?"

They all ran over to him.

"No-o!" Dyatlov thrashed about under his coat and jacket. "No-o!"

He looked up at the people around him in horror, and his eyeballs rolled up so that the whites showed. Then, as if wanting to get up from the stretcher, he arched his chest high.

"He's passing away," the woman whispered.

As though sensing that death, which always stalked them, had entered the house, all the wounded and sick began to awaken and rise from their places. . . .

* V *

In a smoke-blackened little bath-house at the western end of the village two sentries were stationed. Hungry, frozen and dog-tired, they found it hard to make the time pass in their shelter. Other men were posted on the forest road by which the regiment had entered Sukhaya Polyana,

and the two sentries, depending upon them, looked out of the bath-house at rare intervals. But it happened that just when Dyatlov was dying, one of the two, a man with a face blue from the cold and overgrown with a heavy stubble, and with boils on his neck, took a last puff at his cigarette and glanced out of the tiny window at the road leading from the forest. He dug his fingers into his comrade's shoulder.

"Look! Who's that?"

"What's the panic, there are sentries out there—"

Men in greatcoats were running quickly from the forest towards the village in a skirmish line. Sub-machine guns gleamed in their hands.

"Holy mother, Germans!"

"Hell! Start shooting!"

The instant he heard the firing Captain Ozerov guessed that Germans were attacking the village. He jumped up from Dyatlov's side and called to the men behind, "Into action!"

All who could, seized rifles.

"Can you hide them?" Ozerov shouted to the woman.

The woman only waved him aside and hurried to open the cellar trap door, calling to her daughter:

"Motrya, over here! Straw!"

"Follow me!" Ozerov ordered, dashing out of the house.

Andrei ran out on to the steps and in a few bounds reached the ruins of a little stone barn. The firing was so heavy that at first he could hardly make out who was shooting and from where. Bullets were whistling through the air, but he raised his head above the grey stone slabs and saw that all the men in the house who could fight had run out into the front garden, to the shed and into the vegetable patch. Ahead of him lay scattered fence rails and charred rectangles over which rose the naked hulks of brick stoves. Farther on, in the yards of the

last two houses of the village, men were dashing about firing rifles and shouting. Behind him, throughout the village, shouts and cries rose above the noise of the firing.

Andrei loaded his rifle and then raised himself over the stones again to see where to fire. In the last yard two tall men in greatcoats knocked down a soldier in a padded jacket, ran a few paces in Andrei's direction and dropped to the ground near a clump of low, flattened acacia bushes growing along the fence. An instant later other men in greatcoats appeared in the yard and also ran towards the fence.

"Germans!" shouted a voice borne on the wind.

Somewhere behind Andrei, on the other side of the street, a light machine-gun began to chatter in short vicious bursts. One of the men in greatcoats who were running across the yard towards the fence stumbled and then reared up to his full great height—in his raised hand a sub-machine gun was outlined against the sky. The instant the man fell over on his back Andrei realized that the shout from the side had been addressed to him, and with good reason: the Germans were running straight towards him.

Andrei's eyes suddenly glittered an intense black. In that second, for the first time in his life, he became speechless with fury; his bloodless trembling lips twitched in a fierce grimace.

"The rotten swine!"

One of the group of Germans forced to the ground in the last yard by the fire from Ozerov's men ran forward to the acacia bushes by the fence. Andrei fired almost without aiming. Clutching at his chest as though snatching at the bullet, the German staggered three more steps and crumpled to the ground.

Just then another German jumped up out of the acacia bushes and made as if to jump the fence, but Andrei

managed to fire in time. The bullet tore the German from the fence and sent him crashing into the bushes.

"The rotten swine!" Andrei again cried hoarsely.

Every second a new and overpowering hatred grew within him. His entire being was on fire. "Think you've got us, do you?" he said to himself. "Well, you damn bastards, where are you?" He sent bullet after bullet into the acacias. He acted with feverish but keen and calculating swiftness. The ejected cartridges flew out to the side and chattered on the stones.

At that moment Andrei noticed that fighting was going on not only on all sides of the village but beyond it as well, all over the western part of the clearing. And for the first time the din of battle swept over him without causing a tightening of the heart—in that din he heard something challenging, encouraging, even refreshing. Andrei felt bold and confident. He rose to dash forward without considering why. Cries and shots rang out to the right, near the little shed. Several Germans who had filtered through unobserved from the right flank jumped into the yard from behind the shed. Not noticing Andrei among the ruins of the storehouse, they opened fire at the door of the house.

Andrei ripped a grenade from his belt and sent it whistling through the air at the Germans. Before he could see what the explosion had done he hurled a second grenade into the smoke hovering over the yard. Only after he heard the cries of dying men near the shed did he remember that he should have dropped to the ground when throwing the grenades. But this was just a passing thought. He immediately leaped out of the ruins of the storehouse and, carried away by a wave of fury, dashed forward.

In a few bounds he reached the next yard, where the low acacia bushes grew by the fence. He had not much idea why he had picked that yard to run to, but on glanc-

ing back he noticed with satisfaction that other men of the regiment were following him, and he shouted at the top of his voice, "This way! Follow me!"

He jumped on to the charred remains of the house, turned, waved his hand and shouted again, cupping his hands to make himself heard in the wind, "This way! Come on!"

Amidst the ashes, the heaps of smashed brick, the twisted sheets of tin and the blackened boards rose the impressive brick hulk of a Russian stove with a tall, sooty chimney; it stood like a symbol of the immortality of the ravaged peasant cottage. His feet crunching on the rubble, Andrei ran over to the stove and pressd his shoulder to its cold, naked side. Catching sight of a German on the far allotment, he jerked back his rifle bolt. The magazine was empty. He grabbed at his pouch, but there were no cartridges there either. "Damn!" he swore.

A tall German in a helmet sprang out from the other side of the stove. The long skirts of his greatcoat were tucked up under his belt to be out of the way when he ran. He pressed the trigger of the gun he held at his waist, and a stream of bullets flew past Andrei. Andrei realized that the German had not seen him and was firing at random. At the same instant he swung his rifle back and hit the German with the butt.

The German grunted and slumped down beside the stove.

Considering for some reason or other that the rifle with its butt broken was no further use, Andrei threw it aside and flung himself at the German, who was clawing at the bricks in an effort to turn over. Andrei grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him flat on his back. Blood flowed from the German's nose. He opened his mouth to cry out, exhibiting big yellow teeth. Andrei did not know what to do with the German. Before he even had time to think about it he felt his hand seize the knife he had begun to

wear at his belt during the march. When he saw the knife in his hand he knew what he had to do.

"Take that, you swine!" he shouted, falling on the German.

Andrei did not know how many times he struck. He came to himself when he felt somebody pulling him off the German from behind. He brought his knife down a last time, plunging it into the ashes and rubble.

"Stop!" shouted Ozerov, squatting beside him. "Wait!"

Andrei did not recognize Capitan Ozerov immediately. He leaned back exhausted against the stove, his chest heaving, and stared at him for a while without unlocking his clenched teeth. Men ran across the yard, shouting. Beyond the village firing was still going on. Noticing that his right hand was covered with blood and ashes Andrei shuddered and started to rub it against his trousers.

"There!" he said vaguely. "What about that!"

Ozerov looked down at the German and gave a start of surprise: he resembled Kurt Krause, the flyer who had been shot down near Olkhovka. Ozerov recalled the grove in which he had questioned the prisoner, the dark linden, the mess-tin with the unfinished noodles, and Andrei standing at attention with hands trembling at his sides. . . .

The firing beyond the village was dying away.

* VI *

Practically the whole of Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann's company was wiped out at Sukhaya Polyana. After removing the Russians' advance post on the forest road and breaking into the village, Mitmann had been confident that, taken by surprise, the small "Soviet gang" would be annihilated in a few minutes. He did not know that in Sukhaya Polyana itself there was only a small group of Russians and that all the others were under cover in the

forest on both sides of the village. This he realized when hundreds of Russian soldiers launched a grenade and bayonet attack from both flanks. But by then it was too late to do anything to save his company from utter rout. The two waves of Russians came down on it like the two clamps of a steel trap.

In that battle Ozerov's men gave full vent to their desire for vengeance. By some miracle five of Rudolf Mitmann's company survived. They were captured and taken to the house in which the Regiment Headquarters was located.

A short while later twelve heavy German covered carts captured on the forest road were driven up to the same house. In the first cart, urging on the dock-tailed sorrel horses with the reins, sat Semyon Degtyarev, dirty from head to foot but in a gay mood and flushed as though with wine. He jumped lightly to the ground in front of the house and, gathering up the reins, called out, "Come and get my contribution, boys!"

Umrikhin strode down the steps. "Ah, Semyon! You alive?"

"What's the matter, you dead?" Degtyarev said sharply. "Take him."

"Take who? Where?"

"Gone blind? There in the cart."

In the cart, trussed up with rope, lay a German officer in a helmet and a black raincoat.

"Oh!" Umrikhin was surprised. "Their company commander?"

"Right first time! Iron cross and all!" Degtyarev bragged to the men who had run up, as he unbridled the horses, treating them with the care of an owner. "But he's so scared he can't even walk on his own two feet. An officer, but his nerves are weak. Couldn't take it!"

Captain Ozerov asked Commissar Yakhno to supervize the preparations for leaving Sukhaya Polyana, and then

went off to interrogate the captured commander of the German company.

...Five days earlier the infantry regiment in which Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann served had been moved back from the forward lines, where it had been waging offensive action with no success, and had been sent to the rear for a rest and reinforcements. But even there Rudolf Mitmann had not succeeded in getting the rest he so much needed; of late he had been suffering from a complete nervous breakdown. The night before, a big ammunition dump located near the place where the regiment was stationed had been blown up. A few minutes after the crash of the explosions had reverberated through the autumn night, old Colonel von Grott, the regiment commander, summoned Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann. The colonel ordered him to set out at once in search of the small "gang" which had dealt such tremendous damage to the German army.

"*Vernichten!*"* von Grott had ordered briefly.

Dogs picked up the trail and Mitmann's company set out in pursuit. The night was dark and the ground frozen, and the Germans had no way of telling that they were following not a small group but a whole column. Although Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann felt ill he was confident that he would successfully carry through this unexpected and, as he thought, trifling expedition.

And then—sudden and utter rout. And where? Not at the front but on territory so completely occupied by the German army that it would seem the Russian wind should be afraid to stir a hair on his head.... All around were thousands of German troops, and he, Rudolf Mitmann, was a prisoner of the Russians. Was it a dream?

When Rudolf Mitmann came to himself neither his men nor the big Russian officer who had in fluent German tried

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* Annihilate!

to get him to talk were in the house. At the threshold stood a single, peaceful-looking guard. Breathing heavily, Mitmann rose from the floor and looked out of the window. A young birch-tree standing in the front garden as though on sentry duty waved her naked branches at him. Beyond the village a rifle volley rang out. It was the volley Ozerov's men were firing in farewell over the graves of their comrades who had fallen in the fighting at Sukhaya Polyana. Mitmann, however, decided that the Russians were executing his soldiers who had been taken prisoner, and that he himself had only a little longer to live. He went into a fit of hysteria.

When Captain Ozerov returned from the funeral it took him a long time to get the prisoner to answer calmly and intelligibly. Now Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann slumped on the bench, his whole body twitching, now he jumped up in front of Ozerov's table and shouted incoherently, rolling his bloodshot eyes and tearing the buttons off his jacket.

"Sit down and calm yourself, I want to have a talk with you," Ozerov said to the prisoner in German, choosing a moment when the latter could hear him. "It's a very bad thing, Herr Officer, to have such nerves in a war. Calm yourself. Drink some water if you wish."

"I fought in Belgium!" Mitmann shouted rather irrelevantly. "I was in Greece!"

"But this is Russia," Ozerov said. "Is it not?"

"O-o, Russia!" Mitmann fell on to the bench with a groan, his body twitching; he thumped his dishevelled head against the window-sill. "Damn it! This country. . . . What a country! What a people!"

"Our people are like that," Ozerov confirmed. "Didn't you know? You didn't think they were like that?"

"I knew nothing! Nothing!" Mitmann shouted, turning wild, bloodshot eyes on Ozerov. "Colonel von Grott said last night that it was a gang. He fooled me!" He

jumped up again and began to pace in front of the table. "Damn everything! Everything! Everything! This campaign and the army too! What do I need it all for? I'm a nobody!" He started to rip off his shoulder straps. "There! Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann is no more!"

Ozerov rapped on the table with a clip from his pistol.

"Don't rip them off! You're an officer, aren't you?"

"Yes. I am an officer of the German army."

"Sit down! And drink some water!" Ozerov ordered sharply. "You're a poor officer. What made you go and fight if you have no respect for your shoulder straps? Drink!"

Mitmann gulped down a glass of water. Then, in a quiet and surprised voice, he asked, "You won't shoot me?"

"No," Ozerov answered firmly.

"Do you mean that?"

"That is the word of a Soviet officer."

Mitmann moaned. Suddenly he began to sob loudly with relief, clutching at the edge of the table. "I believe you! I believe you! Your word—"

"Stand up!"

When Rudolf Mitmann had fully regained his composure Captain Ozerov stated brusquely, "Yes, I promise you your life. But on one condition: you must answer all my questions honestly and accurately."

"I will," Mitmann hastened to reply. "I'll tell everything!"

The interrogation began. Captain Ozerov spread out on the table a map which he had found in Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann's dispatch case. In the centre of the map were various markings in coloured pencil; they looked like bird tracks.

"Do you know where your forward units are?" Ozerov asked. "Are they stationary? Are they far from here?"

"Yes, they're stationary, and I know where they are," Mitmann replied. "Five days ago our regiment was shifted back from the forward lines. But the other regiments of our division are still there. It's not far from here."

"Show me."

Rudolf Mitmann bent over the section of the map with the markings. He pointed out the sector from which his regiment had moved back for a rest, and the area the division still held. Then, comprehending why Ozerov wanted all this information, he asked thoughtfully, "You wish to get through in the direction of Moscow?"

"Yes."

"You can't. I'm telling the truth. I can tell you that crossing the front now is not difficult, but getting to it is impossible. Here, as you can see, there are no woods almost all the way to the line of the front. Open country. Nowhere to hide. And this whole district—I'm telling the truth—is completely occupied by our troops. They're in every village, on every road. You can't get through!"

"Can't we?"

"No. I'm telling the truth."

Ozerov suddenly brought his fist down on the map.

"We shall get through!" he shouted in a spasm of rage, and his narrowed eyes blazed a hot blue. "What seems impossible to you is possible for us. We'll pass through the very places where there are so many of your troops! And this very night we'll be at the line of the front!"

* VII *

The afternoon turned out unexpectedly clear and sunny. Here and there in the low places that had been shrouded in mist, large and small villages with spreading willow-trees came into view; low trails of greyish smoke spread from them in the blustering wind. The roll-

ing fields suddenly began to glisten as though coated with glaze. Lone crows that had been perching meditatively on abandoned threshing sheds took wing against the wind. The fields were so bright that when a hare bounded out of the weeds the eye tired watching as it dashed away.

Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann, looking like a monk in his long black raincoat, strode along a deserted bumpy road. At his heels marched a sergeant major and two German privates with sub-machine guns, while a short distance behind followed a large noisy column of Russians in dirty padded jackets and ragged greatcoats. They were unarmed. On their backs dangled empty knapsacks and sooty mess-tins. These were Ozerov's men. They marched along in companies. Behind each company two German carts drawn by a pair of sturdy cart horses rattled over the frozen earth; spades and picks stuck out from under the canvas covers of many of the carts. On both sides of the column and behind it marched German soldiers armed with rifles, sub-machine guns, and even light machine-guns.

Fighting the wind, Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann climbed to the crest of a steep rise. In the big sun-flooded hollow ahead lay a village. From the rise he could clearly see groups of German soldiers wandering over the sites of burned-out houses in the village, and dark German tanks moving about.

A low-slung limousine camouflaged in greyish-yellow autumn tones bounced over the road from the village towards the column. When it drew close, Rudolf Mitmann turned to face it, bringing his heels together with a click, and raised two fingers to his cap. The brakes squealed. The door opened and an elderly, grizzled German officer in a cap with an unusually high front, and a cape with a collar of marten fur leaned out, holding on to the door handle.

"Prisoners?" he asked, breathing heavily.

"Yes, Herr Colonel."

"Where are you taking them?"

"To the positions of the 47th Infantry Division, Herr Colonel," Mitmann replied quickly and distinctly. "Near Yelovka."

"To use in an attack?"

"To build fortifications, Herr Colonel."

"Oh-h." The colonel sounded disappointed. "You may go." He slammed the door.

As the high-ranking officer's car drove by, the guards, to demonstrate their zeal, waved their guns and hurried the Russians on with shouts of "*Vorwärts*!"

Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann started down the slope towards the village with long strides, swinging his arms. "Who was that?" the bulky sergeant major walking behind asked him. "Do you know?"

Mitmann turned round quickly. "The commander of a tank regiment. It is stationed in this village. I think he must have suffered considerable losses in the recent fighting."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the sergeant major. "Lead on."

The sergeant major was Captain Ozerov.

...Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann had been dumbfounded when Captain Ozerov, after guaranteeing him and his men their lives, demanded that they lead his regiment through to the forward lines in the guise of prisoners being sent up to build fortifications. Rudolf Mitmann was very much afraid of death, and so he quickly agreed, although not without misgivings.

Unloaded rifles were then issued to the German prisoners. They were strictly forbidden to talk to anybody they met on the way; all they were allowed to do was hurry the men in the column along when they encountered Germans. About twenty of Ozerov's men were put into German uniforms and issued various German weapons. Thus Ozerov built up an "escort" for his regiment. All the others piled their weapons on the captured German

carts and covered them with tarpaulins; for appearances' sake they put spades and picks they had collected in the village in some of the carts. In case of accident, Ozerov decided to have two carts with weapons follow each company. If the need arose, Ozerov's men could arm themselves and be ready for action in a few seconds.

The heavily wounded and the sick could no longer be left in Sukhaya Polyana, but the gloomy mistress of the house in which Stepan Dyatlov had died—Praskovya Mikheyevna was her name, so she had told them in parting—had asked that they be entrusted to her care. They were put in peasant carts and Praskovya Mikheyevna, pointing with her whip to the forest into which she would take them, promised earnestly, "We'll save them. We've got friends everywhere there."

"Long life to you, Praskovya Mikheyevna!" Ozerov said.

"Thanks. The same to you."

Ozerov's regiment set out from Sukhaya Polyana without delaying a minute longer. Time was precious, more precious than it had ever been since the beginning of the march. There was not a minute to lose, for by nightfall, before von Grott learned about the rout of his company, they had to pass through a zone of open country, where there was a big concentration of German troops, and enter the large forest beyond which lay the front.

The regiment moved ahead quickly.

The colonel in the car was the first German they had met on the way from Sukhaya Polyana. Ozerov's men had not been afraid of this meeting, yet they had experienced a certain degree of nervousness as they braced themselves for it. When it all went off so simply and smoothly their spirits noticeably rose. Some even started to joke.

"A thick-headed lot, these Germans!"

"We fooled 'em properly!"

"Always been known as a sloppy crowd!"

But when they saw that the village their column was approaching was occupied by a big German unit they fell silent again. Involuntarily they closed ranks, and increased their pace over the bumpy road.

One of the carts was driven by Semyon Degtyarev. In it, covered with a German cape-tent camouflaged to resemble yellowing leaves, lay Andrei. After the battle Andrei had felt worse than before. When he learned, however, that all the wounded and the sick were being left in the woods near Sukhaya Polyana he mustered his last ounce of strength, fell in, and marched out of the village in the column. But his strength soon failed him. After an hour's march he fainted. He was put in Semyon Degtyarev's cart. Consciousness returned quickly, but he was so weak that he could scarcely raise himself up to look out at his comrades and at the fields of the Moscow area, which were so sunny that day.

A startlingly tall soldier in a German greatcoat that came only to his knees ran up to the side of the cart. He leaned over it and sniffed in his broad fleshy nose, holding his gun against his chest.

"Is that you, Ivan?" Andrei asked.

"Ha-ha, didn't recognize me?" Umrikhin grinned.

"H'm, what a mug you've got! Real German!" Andrei said irritably. "I'll just like to give you one in that mug of yours!"

"Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" Umrikhin roared. "Look like one, do I?"

"The spitting image. Go away. Makes me sick to look at you."

As usual, Umrikhin did not take offence. "It's a good thing I do look like one—makes it easier for me. But for you it's harder. Here's this village now...."

Degtyarev turned to join in the conversation. "So what? Trying to scare us again? I'll wrap these reins

round your snout, long shanks, and then you'll run fast enough. Do you hear?"

"Aren't you scared? Seriously?"

Semyon Degtyarev scanned the column of men marching behind the cart. "What a pity! Wonder where our sergeant is."

"Yurgin? There he is, walking behind."

"Why doesn't he give you a good dressing-down, Ivan?"

"He has already," Umrikhin confessed.

"Then come a little closer."

"What for?"

"These reins of mine are a bit short. I can't reach your snout from here." Degtyarev was really angry now. "It wasn't you, you fool, who planned how we'd get through. Our captain himself, Comrade Ozerov, planned it. He's the leader, so you just keep marching and don't complain. And leave the sick man alone."

Umrikhin listened to Degtyarev's outburst in silence as he walked beside the cart. The burnished German gun dangled against his chest like a toy.

"Only don't get cross," Degtyarev concluded good-naturedly. "After all, Ivan, you deserve a dressing-down. You seem to be a decent soldier all round, and then you start wailing—like a bittern in a marsh."

"I'm not cross. To tell you the truth, I feel better when I'm bawled at. It cheers me up. I really am a little scared," Umrikhin admitted simply. "And when someone bawls at me I stop feeling scared. See, I feel better already." He looked ahead. "Oh, we are pretty close!"

Stepping away from the cart and entering into his role of guard, he brandished his gun. His spirits rose.

"Shneher, you bastards!" he shouted playfully in a wild, hoarse voice.

"What's all the noise for?" Degtyarev raised himself

in his seat. "Shut your trap, long shanks, and keep it shut! Besides, what you shout is *schneller*."

"Ah, go on!" Umrikhin waved his sub-machine gun. "I come from Berlin myself."

The column entered the village.

Suddenly Andrei raised himself.

"Lie down, you," Degtyarev whispered.

"No," Andrei protested, "I want to have a look at them."

The column marched in silence down the main street of the village behind Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann and Captain Ozerov. The men had expected that the column would immediately attract the Germans' attention and they would at least ask where it was going. But Ozerov had guessed that this would not happen, and it did not. This was a time when Russian prisoners were being driven not only to the west but to the east, to the front, to dig trenches and build dug-outs, and to serve as screens for attacking German infantry. The Germans calmly went about their business paying no attention to the column of Russians, who were a common enough sight. They fussed round the anti-aircraft guns and tanks stationed in every yard and garden, pulled down fences for firewood, dragged various articles they found hidden in holes and in homes over to their lorries, gathered in groups and talked, lit their pipes.... Only rarely did a German who happened to be near the road stop to cast an indifferent glance at the column.

The men quickly regained their assurance.

Andrei studied the Germans with eager eyes. Hitherto he had met them only in battle. But to see an enemy army in battle is one thing and to see it in everyday life is quite another. Here it was easier to get an idea of what it was like, to gauge its strength and fighting power. Andrei was very glad to have the chance of seeing the German army in peaceful surroundings.

In one of the yards that had no fence he saw several mutilated German tanks; their sides were burrowed with holes, their turrets smashed, and their mangled treads had sunk deep in the mud. One of the tanks had evidently been set on fire in battle; the flames had scorched the paint from the armour in many places, and the yellow swastika they had touched looked like a huge tarantula twisted in death agony.

"See?" Andrei tugged at the back of Degtyarev's coat. "See that?" His eyes and his perspiring face burned with a single dominating thought. "German iron can't take it, eh? Got twisted?"

"Keep quiet, you! Just look and keep quiet."

Many of the Germans had a shabby, bedraggled appearance. They were beginning to suffer from the cold. Forgetting all about military bearing they wandered dejectedly about the village, unshaven, stooped, the crumpled skirts of their thin greatcoats flapping loosely. Some were already wearing not only men's but also women's garb which they had taken from the peasants or found in abandoned villages: old sheepskin coats with gathered waists, lambskin hats, coloured scarfs and coarse hand-knitted mittens.

"See that, Semyon? See it?" Andrei whispered excitedly, turning and twisting. "So that's what they're like! Real riff-raff! See?"

"Shut up, Andrei! Just look and keep quiet!"

In the yard of the last house in the village Andrei saw a large number of birch crosses neatly stacked against a shed. "Things are going bad for them, Semyon," he said, falling back exhausted.

"Fought themselves out!" Semyon replied. "They're at the end of their tether now. You can see it. Well, Andrei, you just wait.... When our boys get going they'll flatten them out! Yes, Andrei, we'll be coming back through these places yet. Our hour will come!" Now he

was carried away by his words. "Our hour will come! And it will be an hour! Yes, we'll show them!"

The column moved on towards another village.

* VIII *

Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann conducted Ozerov's regiment not along the main road leading to the sector of the front held by the German 47th Division but along narrow country roads where fewer reserve troops were stationed. By sunset they met only rare ambulances and single carts. When it was quite dark, following a faint cart track, they entered a big, autumn-frayed forest of mixed trees. Here, in the deserted forest, there was utter silence.

"On the other side of the forest are our positions," Mitmann announced.

Ozerov called a halt.

The carts were left in the road. The men fell out, dropped down wearily under the trees and began to swallow the remains of the bread and tinned food they had captured in the fighting at Sukhaya Polyana. They conversed cautiously, in low voices, keeping their ears attuned to the silence of the forest, and hiding the glowing ends of their cigarettes in their sleeves.

Night had descended in a calm. It grew warmer. The Milky Way glittered in the sky like a vein of gold. Clusters of stars hung low over the earth. Inside the forest there was a stillness that one rarely finds in a frontal zone. Then somewhere in the distance a machine-gun broke into a chatter, as though wishing to reassure itself in the absolute quiet.

Captain Ozerov climbed into one of the carts, took off the German uniform and put on his own. "Breeches!" he whispered to Petya Uralets, his ever-faithful orderly. "Boots!"

While dressing he talked in a low voice with Rudolf Mitmann, who stood near the back of the cart, chewing down a slice of bread.

"Was your regiment holding this sector?"

"Yes," Mitmann replied. "Just on the other side of this forest."

"To whom did you turn over your positions?"

"They were taken over by a separate battalion of engineers, Herr Captain," Mitmann replied, finishing the bread and now feeling somewhat more cheerful after the tiring march. "You see, the commander of the division marked this sector as totally unsuitable for an offensive The roads leading to the forest, as you saw, are very poor, and inside the forest they are still worse. There are many marshes here. It is impossible to concentrate a large body of troops with heavy armaments on this sector, particularly during the autumn rains. The Russian troops our regiment came into contact with hold much more advantageous positions: a chain of heights that are excellent for defence. When the hopelessness of continuing to attack on this sector became evident, our regiment, as one which had suffered losses, was moved back to the rear and a battalion of engineers placed here temporarily. Solely to guard the sector. They are massing troops for new battles, as I have told you already, quite a distance to the north of this forest."

"That means this is the junction of two divisions?"

"Quite correct, Herr Captain."

Ozerov was pulling on his boots with difficulty.

"Now it should be clear to you, Herr Captain," Mitmann continued meanwhile, "that I cannot lead you any farther. Prisoners sent to the forward units for various purposes are usually taken to staff headquarters. Only then, and under special escort, are they allowed to proceed farther, to the forward lines. For obvious reasons I cannot walk into the headquarters of the battalion of

engineers. And it seems to me that there is nothing for you to do there either. From here on you must go through by yourselves. And I warn you from the start that although the battalion is quite dispersed you will not, of course, be able to avoid a skirmish."

Ozerov climbed down from the cart.

"Everything is clear," he said. "Where are your men?"

The German prisoners came up.

"Well," Ozerov began, straightening his clothes and feeling in his pockets. "You have done your job, and now you will—"

Mitmann flinched. "Herr Captain!"

"Don't interrupt me! I don't like it!" Then he continued in a low voice, "And now you will be able to convince yourselves that a Russian officer is as good as his word. When we go on you will remain here. You will be free. You may go wherever you wish. But you must give up your weapons now."

One of the German soldiers, a short man, stepped forward out of the darkness and, turning to Ozerov, said quickly, "I do not wish to go back. Herr Captain, may I go on together with you?"

"With us? To become a prisoner?"

"Yes, Herr Captain, I have always been in sympathy with your country and had a different opinion of it from what our nazis have. And I am very much against this war."

"What is your name?"

"Hans Langhut, a blast-furnace man from the Ruhr."

"All right," Ozerov agreed. "You will go with us."

The other soldiers spoke up out of the darkness:

"I also would like to—"

"Now it's better for us to go forward than back."

"At least we'll stay alive."

Rudolf Mitmann stood for a time in silence.

"Yes, it's very strange but they're right," he said at

last. "We'll be shot tomorrow, of course. And you, Herr Captain, give us your word that we shall be granted our lives?"

"Yes. Like all prisoners."

"Oh, I believe you!" Mitmann exclaimed. "We'll go with you."

Ozerov smiled faintly in the darkness. "Excellent. Petya, take their guns and put them away, and turn the prisoners over to Battalion Commander Zhuravsky."

Commissar Yakhno came up. As he and Ozerov had agreed, he had brought up the rear all the way. When the halt was called he had posted sentries, handed out the remainder of the bread to the company sergeant majors for distribution among the men, and then had made his way up through the forest, stopping to talk to the men under the trees. When he found Ozerov he gave his hand a hard squeeze—silently congratulating him on the success of their unusual sally—and immediately drew him away from the cart.

"Come over here a moment."

"You're a tireless walker," Ozerov remarked.

When he had heard all the news Yakhno grew enthusiastic.

"Now I'll go first, shall I?"

"As you wish."

"You know, old man, I just can't march in the rear!" the Commissar exclaimed with feeling. "I realize that sometimes, like today, it is very important. But just the same I can't. It takes the heart out of me. How difficult it is to be last, isn't it?"

Suddenly the stars began to fade. A film of cloud covered the sky. Rain was coming up again out of the west. From invisible heights came the distant mournful drone of engines: squadrons of German planes were on their way to bomb Moscow.

* IX *

The men took their guns from the carts.

Andrei was awakened by the cold an hour before sunrise. He immediately sensed that the regiment was preparing to move. Soldiers kept running past him, and he heard muffled commands being given. Beside his cart Umrikhin and Degtyarev were talking in excited whispers.

"We'll get through, Ivan. Don t you worry."

"Ah, Semyon, if only we do! Where will you be?"

"In the break-through group on the right."

"Better if you marched in the column."

"Can't. Got to say good-bye to those Germans."

Other men came up to the cart. One bent over Andrei and prodded him.

"Well, Lopukhov? Feel better?"

Andrei recognized Captain Ozerov's voice.

"Comrade Captain!" he murmured with difficulty, feeling a lump in his throat. "Don't leave me here, for heaven's sake!"

"No, no, of course not. Just calm down, old man." Ozerov straightened the German greatcoat someone had thrown over Andrei. "You lie quiet. We'll get you through. It's not far now. Sergeant Yurgin will ride along with you. His foot is bothering him. And you'll be driven by—" He turned towards the horses. "Who'll take them?"

"I've been ordered to, Comrade Captain," Umrikhin answered. "It's hard for me to walk too. I've got blisters from those damn German boots. They looked good but they turned out to be as hard as iron."

"See you get them through!"

"Why, or course, Comrade Captain. I've carted more important loads in my time. I was stableman on the col-

lective farm for ten years. Even had a pedigree stallion in my charge."

"Be careful, you'll answer for them with your life!"

Ozerov bent over the cart again.

"Want to smoke?"

"I'd like to," Andrei confessed.

"Wait a minute, I'll roll you one." Ozerov reached for his pouch. "Just a little left. Well, now it'll last till we get there. . . ."

When Captain Ozerov had handed Andrei the lighted cigarette and left, Umrikhin suggested to his friend, "Semyon, let's roll ourselves fags too before we start out."

"But there isn't enough left for more than one."

"Well, let's finish it off," Umrikhin said. "We won't have a chance to smoke on the way anyhow. And now we're going to join up with the army soon, why save it? We'll have plenty then, I suppose."

They lit up.

Soon after, Degtyarev said good-bye to his friends.

"A dare-devil, that Semyon is!" Umrikhin exclaimed with approval and an unusual touch of sadness, as his friend disappeared among the men crowding on the road. "There's a man a song ought to be written about, Andrei. A good song it would be too!"

As he passed down the column Ozerov ran into Yakhno.

"What do you say, Veniamin Petrovich?"

Yakhno glanced up at the overcast sky.

"It's time," he said.

"Good luck, then!"

The vanguard break-through group, headed by Yakhno, set out, and a few minutes later the column followed.

Andrei lay on his back looking up at the sky. It was overcast, starless. Within the forest it was still difficult to see that dawn was breaking. The column

appeared to be moving along a rough path instead of a road, for the cart bumped over roots and fallen branches. At times the iron-rimmed wheels broke through the frozen surface of the path and sank deep into the marshy ground, and then the horses struggled and strained to get them out. At times broad fir branches, barely discernible in the gloom, swept low across the cart; rain was coming, and the firs had a strong, fresh smell, as in spring. At times undergrowth scraped across the bottom of the cart.

Involuntarily Andrei recalled the night Captain Ozerov had led the small group of men to the Vazuza. There had been the same bleakness then as now. And the forest had been just as silent and frowning, as though it grew in some underground place uninhabited by man, beast or bird. But now Andrei did not experience the dread he had then. He knew the advance detachment was led by Yakhno, the Commissar of the regiment, and the column by Captain Ozerov. His boundless faith in these men, in their courage and fortitude, filled his heart with peace. He knew that these two men would lead the regiment across the front line.

But Andrei was impatient. The thought that he could not walk caused him anguish. How he wanted to muster all his strength, jump down from the cart and march along with his comrades, so as to get across to his army as soon as possible!... Now he would throw back his head to catch a glimpse of Umrikhin, who was constantly flicking the horses with the reins, now raise himself on his elbow to look at Matvei Yurgin.

"Soon now, chaps?" he kept whispering.

His friends calmed him with, "Soon, Andrei, soon. Just lie there quiet."

Andrei rapidly became more and more feverish. His eyes burned. His lips grew dry. He tried to throw off the greatcoat.

"Faster!" he whispered. "Why have they stopped? What for? Must go faster.... Ivan, drive faster, faster. Why are you standing still?"

"He's getting delirious," Yurgin remarked.

Andrei did not hear the shots that rang out to the right of the column or see the green rocket swish upward into the paling sky like a bird frightened from her nest. He only felt the cart increase its pace. It began to jolt frequently. Waving the reins, Umrikhin accidentally flicked Andrei twice, but he said nothing: at last they were moving! At one point Andrei heard shots, but he paid no attention to them; he did not ask himself who was shooting or where—he gave himself up completely to the sensation of rapid motion. He waited a while and shouted again, but this time joyfully, "Soon?"

Just then the cart jerked sharply, the shaft struck something, and they came to a stop. As though in a dream, Andrei heard loud voices:

"Oh-h, darn our luck!"

"Killed? Who's killed?

"The horse!"

* X *

Degtyarev clutched at the straggly tufts of grass to pull himself up and it dawned on him that this was the second time he had tried. Why? What was wrong? A wave of agonizing pain swept over his body, and Degtyarev realized what had happened to him. "Did they get through or not?" he wondered. "Must have." But he could not think for long; the pain was so intense that it confused things in his mind. His hands were all right. That was good. The toes of his right foot moved easily inside his boot. But his left leg was heavy and hot; it felt like a burning log.

Degtyarev's first impulse was to get away from the place where the German bullets had knocked him off his feet. He sensed that no one was about and he could no

longer hear any firing, but somehow that spot was terrifying. The idea that he must get away quickly was so strong that he almost forgot his pain as he began to crawl in the direction he imagined the edge of the forest to be.

He crawled along, clutching convulsively at the grass and dragging his burning left leg behind him. He came to some sort of a pit and felt round the edge of it with his fingers. He decided to go round the pit from the right. When he tried to do this his wounded leg caught on an exposed root and sent a fiery pang that seemed to stab his heart. He cried out and, almost unconscious, pulled up his leg. He was not crying, nor did he wish to cry, but big tears rolled down his cheeks. His hands on the edge of the pit, he gazed through his tears into the gloom of early morning and then, summoning his strength, whispered, "And here's my grave. . . ."

He had whispered these words without thinking. But when the sound of them sank into his consciousness he recoiled from the pit.

A new thought—the thought of life—proved even stronger than the first impulse that had driven him from that terrifying spot. He now felt that he possessed more strength than he actually had. Breathing heavily, he struggled forward, confident that he was crawling east—his goal for weeks past.

He crawled on, trembling from head to foot and frequently lying flat to catch his breath. Somehow he managed to reach a clearing. In the clearing stood a ramshackle little house; all the outbuildings round it had been wrecked. Degtyarev raised himself on shaking arms and, exerting all his strength, shouted in what was almost a loud voice, "Hey, anyone there!"

No one answered. He shouted again, but this time, for some reason, not even the deep forest silence echoed his cry.

He realized that there was not a single living soul in this tumbledown forest hut. But nevertheless, after a rest he crawled towards it; he had always been accustomed to believe that where there was a house there was life. Laboriously, with frequent cries of pain, he dragged himself up on the porch and slowly pushed open the door. A musty odour struck him in the face out of the darkness, and he started back from the door. Clearly the house was empty, but after another moment's hesitation Degtyarev rolled himself over the doorstep. Another stab of pain shot through his heart. Unconsciously he let out a shriek, horrible as only a man's shriek can be.

When the pain relaxed, he suddenly heard a familiar sound. It seemed so incongruous in the deserted house that he pressed close to the wall and held his breath. Then he said out loud, in order to hear his own voice, "A clock."

Probably the war had driven the woodsman out of his home only that evening. Perhaps he had abandoned it in panic, snatching up whatever came to hand, and had forgotten about the clock. But the clock, wound by the hand of its owner, was still going, ticking clearly and rhythmically, as it had ticked when normal, peaceful life went on in the house.

"A clock," Degtyarev repeated.

He crept closer to the wall on which the clock hung. His whole body felt the caressing warmth of the ticking and he pressed a cheek wet with tears and sweat to the floor. Soothed, he fell into a doze.

A little later Degtyarev awoke with a start and raised himself on his elbow. The ticking was barely audible. Then there was a click inside the mechanism, and a rattle, just as though the clock were choking in the stuffiness of the deserted house, and it fell silent. For a long time he strained his ears; he kept expecting the clock to clear its throat, like a living person, and

then resume its ticking. It became hard to breathe. His head was hot and heavy; he felt that he had only to move it and it would jingle like a tambourine all hung with copper coins and bells. And there was a rattling in his chest, like the one he had just heard in the clock. "I'm dying," he thought. "The spring has run down." Then, realizing that he was to die amidst the stillness of the forest, he began to claw at his chest in terror. At that moment he noticed a strong beam of light coming from one side of his body. What could it be? The torch at his belt, which he had completely forgotten, had switched itself on. He unfastened it and in the greenish circle of light saw an old wall clock with chains and weights and a big moon-shaped pendulum.

Degtyarev's strength was failing fast, and he knew it. There was that rattling in his chest; the hot stabs in his heart were growing stronger. Now the light tinkle had become a heavy copper bell ringing in his head. But, gasping for breath, he started to raise himself. The floor under him was damp and sticky. Degtyarev realized it was blood, but he did not give up his idea. Each movement cost him excruciating pain, but he gritted his teeth and climbed up on a chest standing against the wall. Then he closed his eyes and rested for a long time with his head against the window-frame. The faint beam of the torch on the floor bathed his pale, sweating face.

Suddenly a shudder ran through his body at the thought that he might not have time to do what he had planned. He braced his hands on the window-sill and pulled himself up on to his right knee. At that moment he saw more clearly than before that his strength was ebbing. Quickly, almost in desperation, he caught the chain and jerked it downward. The weights flew up, banging against the wall. Now he had barely any strength left. Afraid he would not be able to hold himself there a few seconds more, he pressed up against the wall and, seeing

nothing, began to fumble about feverishly for the pendulum. As he pushed it, he crumpled on to the trunk.

He lay there motionless, feeling no pain, his eyes closed in utter exhaustion, his face green in the beam of the flashlight, and listened to the rhythmic ticking of the clock.

* XI *

When they had put about half a mile between themselves and the forest in which they had had the brief skirmish with the Germans, Captain Ozerov stopped the column for a while in a deep hollow to wait until all the men came up. Everybody hurried, for the fields were quickly growing light and the Germans might spot the column hiding in the hollow and start shelling it. They had to move as soon as possible.

Umrikhin, aided by Matvei Yurgin, dragged Andrei along the ground on a strip of canvas to the hollow. A minute after Andrei was laid in another cart he recovered consciousness and opened his eyes. A cloudy morning was dawning over the hollow. He could hear footsteps and muffled voices near by. A man was bending over the cart, snuffling loudly; his body shook and he kept turning his head from side to side. Andrei recognized Umrikhin. He parted his dry lips and said, "Where are we, Ivan? Have we crossed over?"

Umrikhin straightened up and turned his face away.

"Who knows? Some say we have already. . . ."

"Have we really? But—but what are you crying about?"

"I feel bad about Semyon."

"Semyon?"

"They say he was killed."

Noticing that Andrei was sweating, Umrikhin bent over him and carefully wiped his forehead and temples with a bit of dirty rag.

"Oh, Andrei!" he whispered, screwing up his face and controlling his quivering lips. "Our Semyon's left behind." Again he turned his face away. "A fellow like that—he was worth more than anything! For every drop of his blood we ought to kill one of those bastards! And even that wouldn't be enough. But, of course, he was a Party man. And he was young—he faced up to life, like facing up to the wind, he did. The first time I ever listened to such a young fellow as if he was older than me, and it didn't hurt."

"What are you babbling about?" Andrei asked weakly. "Who killed him?"

"If you can't remember anything lie there quiet and don't bother me. Just say thanks for dragging you out."

Matvei Yurgin limped up.

"Well, found out?" Umrikhin asked him. "Have we crossed over?"

"We don't know yet."

"What do you mean? Isn't this our side of the front?"

"Nothing is known yet, Ivan."

Nobody in the column could make out whether they had crossed the front or not. At that time the Germans still did not wish to believe that their October offensive on Moscow had been frustrated. Hence they had no intention of setting up a clearly delineated front; they dug in most unwillingly, in extreme cases, when Soviet troops blocked their way with particular stubbornness. On the Soviet side, however, the line of the front was becoming more and more distinct. On some sectors Soviet forces were retreating, giving up villages; on others they were withdrawing of their own accord to more advantageous positions. But all Soviet forces near Mascow were working towards one and the same objective: to stop the enemy, consolidate their positions and build up a firm defence line.

According to Rudolf Mitmann, there were Russian advance posts on the first low hills beyond the hollow in which the column was hiding from the Germans. While the men of the regiment were gathering in the hollow a patrol headed by Commissar Yakhno reached those hills. But it found no Russian posts there. The shallow trenches and the dug-outs were empty; all around lay heaps of rusty cartridge cases.

Yakhno soon returned, highly agitated. "It's bad!" he said to Ozerov, pitching his voice low so that nobody else should hear. He wiped the sweat from his face. "There's nobody there!"

They called Mitmann over. He again confirmed that five days earlier advance Russian posts had been stationed on those heights. Ozerov realized that in the five days of Mitmann's absence big changes had taken place on this sector.

"What's happened?" he asked Yakhno. There was obvious agitation in his voice too. "Have they withdrawn?"

"I can't understand it."

"You saw no dead men in the trenches?"

"No."

"That means they withdrew of their own accord," Ozerov concluded with confidence. "But in that case where are the Germans? In the forest we met only a small group. Perhaps when the Germans saw our forces draw back they moved up after them, and that group left in the forest was some sort of service unit. Perhaps we're only approaching the real line of the front."

Captain Ozerov cast his eye over the column. Even in the hollow, where the dusk lingered longest, it was growing light. Now strips of winter grain, abandoned shocks and lone sweet-briar and acacia bushes could be seen on the rising ground for some distance around.

Yakhno frowned. "Yes, it's quite light."

"Forward, march!" Ozerov ordered in an expressionless voice. "If there are Germans ahead, by this time they've been warned about us from the rear. There'll be only one thing left for us: to fight our way through. We can't stay here."

"I'm off," said Yakhno.

The regiment moved out of the hollow.

As they marched up the gentle slope many of the men and officers of the regiment cast anxious glances back. Soon the dark band of the forest at the fringe of which the skirmish had taken place an hour earlier came into view. Now the Germans in the forest would surely notice the big column on the move. Fire from German batteries at the edge of the forest was to be expected any minute.

But the Germans were silent.

A winding trench smashed in places by shells came into view on the slope; from it communication trenches sprouted eastward. The first company followed Yakhno's small group across the trench, went over the ridge and started to hurry down the eastern slope, which was also scarred with communication trenches and slits and dotted with the little mounds of dug-outs. Now that the men of the first company could no longer be seen from the forest they cheered up visibly; they did not know that the main danger might still lie ahead. But Captain Ozerov was worried. Casually he unbuttoned the collar of his padded jacket.

From the east, beyond the second range of heights, which were wooded, came the muffled bark of a gun, and a few seconds later the men heard the whine of a shell. It threw up a cloud of earth a hundred metres to the right of the column, and an instant later a second shell whistled past. This one crashed into the hillside to the left; a huge black mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke rose from

the place of the explosion. Then Commissar Yakhno's high-pitched, happy voice rang out over the slope, "Comrades, those are our guns! Hurrah!"

Commissar Yakhno was not an army man by profession and Ozerov could not make out whether he had simply guessed that those were our guns or had only said it to keep the men from taking panic at that moment. But Ozerov himself felt certain that the fire was coming from one of our batteries. This meant that the observation post had taken them for Germans launching a sudden attack in the dusk of early morning without artillery preparation. As Yakhno's voice faded away Captain Ozerov turned and cried out at the top of his voice, "Those are ours! Ours! Take cover!"

Nobody heard the third shell. It burst in front of the column. Out of the smoke, which obscured the range of wooded hills, invisible shell splinters whistled over the column.

Commissar Yakhno toppled over backwards. Not understanding what could have happened to him in that moment of great joy, he lifted himself up, gazed eagerly at the east and cried out again, "They're ours!" His voice broke. "Ours! We are through!" He fell back again with a smile on his lips and closed his eyes.

Cries rent the air. The men scattered in all directions. Fortunately there were trenches and dug-outs all round. The shells burst more frequently. Smoke shrouded the entire slope.

The greater part of the column had not yet come to the ridge and was thus sheltered from the fire of our guns. As soon as the shelling started, everybody on the western slope also made for the trenches and slits.

A minute before this the front wheels of the cart in which Andrei lay had got stuck in a half-smashed trench the column was crossing, and the horses could not pull

them out. As soon as he heard the explosions, Yurgin flushed with the excitement he always experienced in battle.

"Get Andrei!" he ordered, running up to the cart.

Umrikhin picked Andrei up and dragged him into a trench. Frightened by the explosions, the horses suddenly jerked the wheels free and, not realizing at first where the danger lay, galloped towards the ridge. Then they swerved and charged down the hillside with the cart clattering after.

Andrei could not grasp what had happened. Shells were bursting all over the slope, and there were cries and groans from the men. In the moments between explosions he could hear his friends, who were shielding him with their bodies, shouting happily, "It's our guns shooting, ours! Andrei, those are ours!"

Andrei thought his friends had gone mad: shells were crashing down on all sides yet they hugged each other and laughed and wept tears of joy. . . .

Meanwhile Captain Ozerov had leapt out of his trench and was dashing forward. Crouching from time to time, he ran with long, heavy strides to get out of the zone of fire. The shells burst to the sides and splinters whistled over his head but he ran on and on without stopping. When he had almost reached the foot of the hill he stopped abruptly, and over him, as if he had raised fiery wings, fluttered the gold-embroidered banner of the regiment.

* XII *

Ozerov's regiment was stationed in a large village. The unit holding down that sector had already informed Staff Headquarters of the Nth Army that the regiment had crossed the front, and when Ozerov arrived in the village he was immediately summoned to the radio hut,

First, Lieutenant-General Rokossovsky who was in command of the army spoke with him, and then Major-General Borodin. This came as a total surprise to Ozerov. It appeared that Borodin's division, of which the regiment was part, was holding the adjacent sector, a little to the north of where Ozerov's men had crossed the front. Ozerov was overjoyed: the regiment could thus rejoin its division without delay. After reporting briefly to the Division Commander on the state of his regiment, Captain Ozerov said he would like to come back and make a more detailed report later, but General Borodin replied that he would visit the regiment himself as soon as a conference at Army Headquarters ended. He gave strict orders not to disturb the men or make any preparations whatever for his arrival.

"Gold glitters even in the mud," he said.

... A fine grey autumn drizzle began. It was in no hurry to soak the earth; it must have known it had plenty of time for that. Mist shut out the horizon. A flock of sparrows scattered from the lilac bushes, the leaves of which, though nipped by frost, were still green.

Captain Ozerov was going through Yakhno's papers. The shell splinter had hit the Commissar in the region of the heart. It had pierced the edge of his tunic pocket and gone through his Party card and other papers, which were soaked with blood. There was also blood on the snapshots of his wife and son. Ozerov studied the snapshots for a long time. Yakhno's wife had abundant dark hair falling in curls over her shoulders and big eyes with such a direct and forceful expression that Ozerov abruptly turned his gaze away.... The Commissar's son, a shock-headed youngster about five who looked as though he had his father's intensity, sat at a little round table holding a big sun-kissed apple in each hand. The Commissar's family lived in Moscow. "How can I ever write to them?" Ozerov thought with an ache in his heart. "And I must

write today. How can I ever deal them such a blow?" He put the papers into a map case and handed it to Petya Uralets.

"Are they making the coffin?" he asked.

"Yes, Comrade Captain."

"And the grave?"

Uralets turned his face away. "It's being dug."

"Where are the pebbles? Let me have them."

Hiding his swollen, tear-filled eyes from Ozerov, Petya Uralets poured a heap of little coloured stones on to the table from his pocket. Commissar Yakhno had carried them all the way from the Vazuza.

Captain Ozerov fingered the pebbles and sighed.

"Take care of them. When we get a chance we'll send them."

"I'll take care of them, Comrade Captain."

"He looks just as if he's alive," Petya Uralets said as he scooped the pebbles up from the table. "Lying there smiling. It scares me to bury a man like that. I never thought a man could die with a smile."

Ozerov rose. He stood by the table for a minute in silence, his head bowed, as though standing before Yakhno's grave.

"He was a true Bolshevik, Petya," he said at last, raising his eyes. "A man of great faith. With the faith in our cause that he had, Petya, it's easy to live and it's easy to die. Only it's hard to part with men like him. . . ."

A car drew up in front of the house.

"The General!" a messenger announced.

Ozerov went out to meet the Division Commander.

General Borodin, in a silvery grey greatcoat that was almost the same colour as his hair, sprang lightly down from the car. Before Ozerov could utter a word the General threw his arms round his neck, pressed him close and kissed him hard three times on his chapped, wind-

beaten lips. Then he pulled a handkerchief out of the pocket of his greatcoat and, noticing that a small crowd had already collected round the steps and was staring at him in surprise, shouted angrily, twitching his pointed, grizzled moustache:

"Well, what are you staring at me for? Stop staring! You think just because I'm a general I—Stop staring!" he shouted again. When he had wiped his eyes he pointed to Ozerov. "He is the one to stare at! Look, marvel, and envy his happiness! He has already shown how a man should serve his country and be loyal to his army!" With these words the General flung open his greatcoat and strode into the house.

In the front room he immediately took off his coat and, silently refusing Ozerov's offer of assistance, himself hung it on a nail near the door; he intended to make a long stay with the regiment. Rubbing his hands, he surveyed Ozerov, as though trying to determine how he had changed in the month since their meeting on the bank of the Vazuza. The General was very pleased to note that there was nothing about Ozerov's appearance to indicate his long and arduous march: his tunic and breeches were neatly pressed, his boots shone, his cheeks were freshly shaven, and there was even a strong scent of Eau de Cologne about him. "So he hasn't forgotten the reprimand I gave him at the Vazuza," the General noted with satisfaction, and, suddenly grasping Ozerov's hands, he finally said what he had wanted to say as soon as they met.

"Well, thanks, old chap, for everything, for everything! You acted like a true Russian. I thank you. I am proud to have such officers in my division!"

Ozerov drew himself up before the General.

"I serve the Soviet Union, Comrade General!" he said, replying to the commendation in regulation style.

"You serve it well! Very well, Comrade Major!"

Ozerov opened his mouth to speak, but General Borodin stopped him with a gesture.

"Major! I know your rank better than you do!" He searched in his trouser pocket and drew out four little metal rectangles covered with ruby enamel. "Accept these new insignia. Your promotion came through yesterday. Put them on at once, and then we'll talk."

General Borodin talked with Ozerov for about two hours. He questioned him in detail about the battle the regiment had fought at the crossing, about its march to the east, about the present condition of the men, their needs, and what had to be done to restore the regiment's fighting power quickly and completely. The General ordered the wounded and sick to be sent to field hospitals at once. All the others were to be given three days' full rest. He announced that on orders from the Commander of the Army, lorries with complete outfits of winter clothing and food for the regiment would arrive in the village by evening. That same day the whole regiment must have a bath, draw new uniforms and be given as much food as it could eat. Only after it had rested, would the regiment move up to the sector held by the division and receive the replacements and armaments it needed.

"All your rear services, by the way," the General announced, "are with the division. I have already informed them of the regiment's arrival."

"How are they, Comrade General?"

"In full order. They were with us all the time."

General Borodin rose from his chair near the little iron stove and sat down at the table. A large, dented copper samovar was now steaming away noisily on the table—Petya Uralets knew that the General was a great tea-drinker. The General poured his own glass.

"I suppose now you're waiting to hear what I have to tell you?" he asked, glancing up at Ozerov.

"I am, Comrade General"

"So I see."

Drinking the hot tea in small sips, General Borodin described how the division had retreated from the Vazuza after eluding the German pincers; how, while withdrawing, it had engaged the enemy on every suitable line and inflicted heavy losses on him. The General was having obvious difficulty in controlling his emotion. He rose from the table without finishing his tea.

"Historians," he said, pacing the room, "will study our October retreat with amazement and with just as much interest as victorious offensive operations are studied! What I observed in our army during the days of October may be considered a miracle! Yes, I say that in all earnestness. As you know, it is considered a commonplace occurrence for the worst human traits to come out in the mass of the men during such a difficult retreat, and in the final analysis it is that which turns an army into a herd. But with us the opposite took place. Never was our fighting man so pure as in those days when he was performing such noble deeds in the name of his country!"

The General stopped near the window, and Ozerov noticed that he was barely holding back tears, he was so overcome by his recollections, his admiration for his men, and his grief for the fallen.

"Yes, I am an old man," he continued, "but I have only to look at those soldiers of ours and I feel young again, young as the spring: what people have come into being in our country!"

"During the years of Soviet power new traits have appeared in our men: exceptional fidelity to our country's great cause, the feeling of collectivism, and a sense of responsibility for the destiny of the entire world. The whole world should gaze upon our men with admiration and learn from them how to perform one's duty as a human being."

A group of soldiers walked past the house. They were in wet, dirty greatcoats and broken boots, and they plodded through the mud wearily, but their faces as they talked were happy and animated. General Borodin followed them with his eyes until they disappeared down a side street. Then he shifted his gaze to a rain-washed lilac bush in the front garden.

"Strange," he suddenly said in a reflective tone. "Lilac leaves are made of the same stuff as the leaves of other trees. But the leaves of other trees turned yellow and fell a long time ago, while the lilac leaves are still green and holding fast. And you know"—he turned to face Ozerov, who had come up to the window—"the lilac leaves stay like that right until the winter. And when they do fall they are still green! Isn't that wonderful?"

He turned away from the window. "Line up your regiment," he suddenly ordered.

"Yes, Comrade General," Ozerov replied. "May I ask if you will speak to the men?"

"I wish to bow to your men."

* XIII *

Andrei was sitting on a block of wood in front of a little iron stove. The damp fir logs in the stove smouldered, refusing to burn. It was cool and quiet in the tent, and there was a strong odour of medicines. Through the mica window, half of which was shaded by a fir branch, came the grey light of a November morning. A dull rumble sounded in the distance, as though big empty barrels were being rolled about.

Early that morning ambulances had evacuated all the sick and wounded men in the tent to hospitals in the rear. Only Andrei was left, and he felt miserable at being alone. "Gosh, what a dull place!" he muttered, poking the wood in the stove. "Once you get into the hands of those

doctors you're lost! They'll doctor you to death! They just love it when a man gets a bit ill!" Andrei regarded the three days he had spent in the medical battalion as a dead loss.

During his illness Andrei had changed even more than during the march. His face had paled and become drawn and set, and his eyes had lost their gentle expression and their clear light—evidently forever. Now his glance was brief and hasty and somewhat grim. He spoke in a sharp, at times even cantankerous, voice. In both appearance and character he had suddenly begun to resemble his father.

The wood refused to burn. Throwing down the poker, Andrei muttered, "I'll skip, and that'll be that! Catch me sticking here?"

A hand pushed aside the door flap. "There he is," a medical orderly said. "Step right in."

Bending his head, Matvei Yurgin entered the tent. He wore a long new greatcoat and a cap trimmed with light bluish fur. His swarthy cheeks shone from a recent shave, and he looked younger and more cheerful than during the march.

"Aha, so here you are!" he exclaimed as he advanced into the tent. His voice sounded refreshed and more gentle than usual. "And they told me you'd been shipped out."

Andrei jumped up from the log, beside himself with joy.

"Comrade Sergeant!"

In place of the familiar triangles, bright red enamel squares shone on the collar of Yurgin's greatcoat.

"Comrade Lieutenant!" Andrei faltered and lowered his voice, as though Yurgin had been not promoted but demoted. But at the same instant he sprang forward even more impetuously. "Comrade Lieutenant, you've been promoted?"

"Looks like it," Yurgin said in embarrassment, putting his arms round his friend. "Only yesterday. Major Ozerov comes up to me and says, 'Take over a platoon!' "

"Ours?"

"Yes."

"Comrade Lieutenant!" Andrei burst out, freeing himself from Yurgin's embrace. "I can't stand it! I'm going back to the platoon this minute!"

"That's for the doctors to say."

"Doctors!" Andrei blustered. "Those doctors! What do I need them for? There's a queer stink about this place. It's enough to put anyone on his back! What do I need those doctors for?"

Yurgin glanced round. "Not so loud."

"There's nobody here. I've been moping here by myself all the morning."

The two friends sat down in front of the stove. As though rejoicing at their meeting, the wood suddenly began to crackle gaily and sparks soared up the cracked stove-pipe and out into the freedom of the air.

"You ought to stay in bed more," Yurgin said, surveying his friend with a sidelong look. "Anybody can see you're still weak."

"Don't try to talk me into it, Comrade Lieutenant," Andrei replied. "Don't do me a bad turn. I'd rather hear about the regiment. What's new? Where is it now? How are the boys? You know, these last days I've felt as though I'd been cut off from my roots; I've been so fed-up. Had all kinds of bad dreams. What's the news?"

But then he got up himself, walked over to the entrance and looked out. A scattering of big star-shaped snowflakes was drifting down. Under the shelter of a spreading fir not far from the tent an orderly was chopping wood.

"Hey, Comrade Orderly!" Andrei called. "You don't know where my things are, do you? The coat and every-

thing? Get a move on. I've got to leave. Don't keep me waiting!"

"What am I to do with you?" Yurgin said when Andrei returned to the stove. "Well, all right, get your things and we'll go together. . . ."

"It'll only take me a second. They're bringing my things now."

"So you want to know about the regiment?" Yurgin enthusiastically plunged into an account of the news. "Why, you wouldn't know our regiment now, Andrei! We've been bathing, drawing new uniforms, eating, drinking—three whole days of it. And enough vodka, too! And now all the boys are full of beans, straining to go, believe me. There's no holding them! We've been issued with new weapons. Lots of machine-guns and sub-machine guns. . . . And those bottles. . . . Not the kind we had at the Vazuza, remember? You don't have to light them. All you do is throw them, and they burn by themselves like the devil—nothing can put them out! I've tried them already: just the thing! Well, and we've got replacements. . . ."

"Many?"

"Plenty. Our battalion's been brought up to full strength, and the others have been reinforced too. And there's a new Battalion Commander."

"Who's that?"

"He's a Buryat, name of Sharakshaneh. He's quick and clever, like a steppe eagle. Looks hot-blooded."

"The men all right?"

"They vary. Some are regulars, but most are like you, from the reserves. All kinds. With us in the infantry it's mostly collective farmers and factory workers; but in the artillery and the mortar units there are more of the intelligentsia—you know, teachers, book-keepers, agronomists. . . . They say there's even a writer! Well, you know yourself, you've got to have educated people there."

"Where's the regiment now?"

"Yesterday evening the regiment moved up to the sector where the division is. Not far from the front line. I dare say we'll be moving up to the front line today. It's quite possible."

The ring of an axe came from outside.

"Damn that devil!" Andrei sprang up and dashed out of the tent. "What are you still chopping there for?" he shouted at the orderly. "What are you chopping for, you rotten so-and-so! Where are my things? How long have I got to wait? Then go and tell the doctor, and hurry up about it! The boys may be going into battle today, and you want me to sit here and mope? Hurry up, now!"

When he came back he asked Yurgin, "Who's leading our section?"

"Sergeant Oleinik. One of the new men."

"All right?"

"Pretty sharp by the look of him, but what he'll be like in battle remains to be seen. You only get to know people, Andrei, when you see them in battle."

In an hour, with Yurgin's help, Andrei succeeded in getting his discharge from the medical battalion. He was issued a new uniform, and the chief medical officer, with whom he had had to argue his case, suddenly softened and treated the friends to a glass of vodka in parting.

* XIV *

The road to the temporary camp of Ozerov's regiment lay across fields sown here and there with winter crops and through small woods thickly strewn with rotting leaves and filled with the blue haze of autumn. Andrei had been taken to the medical battalion in a covered lorry and so he had not seen the frontal zone. When he saw it now he was struck by what had been done there. As he

came out of the wood in which the medical battalion was stationed he stopped in amazement: across the entire field, from north to south, stretched a big bank of clayey earth, which looked like the rampart of an ancient fortress.

"It's an anti-tank ditch," Matvei Yurgin explained.

A shaky bridge of boards had been thrown across the ditch; only light ambulances and carts could cross it, and even then at a risk. Andrei halted on the bridge and cast a glance to the north; he could not see the end of the ditch beyond a rise in the field. Then he looked south to where the ditch ran into a wood. Abruptly he pushed his hat on to the back of his head.

"Gosh, what a ditch!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Straight as an arrow! And all the earth that had to come up! Comrade Lieutenant, do you really think it can't be crossed?"

"By a tank? Not a chance!"

"Who dug it? Do you know?"

"Of course I do. Moscow women, all of it," Yurgin replied, his face darkening for some reason. "You just wait—you'll get a lot more big surprises farther on. All the autumn people have been working here, Andrei. And you know who? City-bred women who most likely never held a shovel in their lives, and young girls who still ought to be having a good time at the cinema. . . . That's who, boy! And just look at what they've done! They say they've dug ditches like that all along the front. And not only ditches. There are all kinds of obstacles everywhere, besides. Yes, they did a terrific job here. Now that I've seen it, Andrei, I feel ashamed."

"Ashamed? Why?"

"Ashamed when I think of those Moscow women, so ashamed I don't know where to hide my face," Yurgin replied gloomily. After crossing the bridge he plodded through the slippery mud for a long time in silence. "If

we'd stopped the Germans farther back," he said finally, "those women would never have had to dig like that. And another thing that makes me ashamed is that they're most likely standing up to the hardships of the war better than we are."

After that they walked on in silence. And Andrei indeed had many an occasion to marvel at what the women of Moscow had accomplished in that frontal zone. It was an almost solid zone of defences which the enemy would find hard to negotiate. Deep, winding trenches ran through all the fields; blockhouses with dark firing slits stood on the rises in the terrain; powerful lines of anti-tank obstacles and barbed-wire entanglements covered the clearings, and in the woods were abatis that not even an animal could get through. . . .

"If we don't hold our ground here, we really won't be able to look anybody in the eye," Andrei reflected. "No, the Germans won't get through here!" And suddenly, for the first time in his life, he felt a great urge to be fighting.

* XV *

Major Ozerov's regiment was camped in a forest not far from the forward lines. Other units had camped there on their way to the front; the area was dotted with fresh stumps and strewn with unused tree-tops and heaps of damp chips and fir branches; there were many abandoned, water-filled slit trenches, broken-down shelters and horse pens, and holes filled with ashes and the charred ends of logs. . . . The stripped and trampled forest was alive with men in grey greatcoats. The camp was full of movement. Here and there in the hastily-built dug-outs and shelters lights could be seen.

Yakov Oleinik's section had taken over a big shelter under two bushy firs. With the exception of Umrikhin

almost the whole section was now comprised of replacements. Only three of the new men came from the regular army. The most conspicuous among these was Terenti Zhigalov, a Komsomol member, a thin, sharp-nosed soldier with eyes that were always wide open and on guard, as if expecting a sudden flash of fire. He had retreated from the very border; he had been wounded, and taken prisoner by the Germans, from whom he had miraculously escaped a week later, and had then spent about a month in hospital. Every mention of the Germans threw him into a rage, and he would spring up and burst into a heated torrent of words, gesticulating violently. The other two regulars—Kovalchuk, a Byelorussian, and Medvedev, a man from the Urals—had had less combat experience; both had been wounded and had been treated in a hospital near Moscow. There they had met Zhigalov, and the three had been sent to the regiment together. All the other men in the section had been called up from the reserves. Fate had brought them together from many places. Sergeant Oleinik came from the Murom area—he had been a fur buyer there; Osip Chernyshov was a famous bricklayer from Moscow; Fyodor Kochetkov, a gardener from a state farm near Moscow; Tikhon Kudeyarov, a collective-farm stockbreeder from the district of Vladimir; Petro Semiglaz, team leader from a collective farm in Kiev Region; Nurgalei Hasanov, an assistant combine-operator from Tartaria, and Kuzma Yartsev, a cabinet-maker specializing in bentwood furniture, who came from the same district as Sergeant Oleinik, the section commander. Some of them had already seen action but had fallen out of their units for various reasons and then landed in the reserve regiment; others were only recent arrivals at the front and had not yet had a taste of war. Even the recent arrivals, however, had served in the army before, some for a longer period, others for less, and they knew soldiering.

The section gave Andrei a friendly welcome.

"What did I tell you?" Umrikhin crowed. "So my dream was right!"

The m n moved over to make room for Andrei by the fire, and immediately several tobacco pouches were offered to him. While he smoked after his walk they told him the regiment news. Before he even had time to look round the shelter Andrei felt at home among his new comrades in these familiar soldier's surroundings.

Andrei took an immediate liking to Sergeant Oleinik. The section leader was a tall, well-built fellow as quick and lithe as a wild cat. His face was almost as swarthy as Yurgin's and he had bright black eyes with a feline slant. He sat down beside Andrei and immediately announced, briefly and precisely, "Well, you'll be a machine-gunner. It's been decided. Know how?"

"The light gun? Yes. I was taught."

"Right. You'll draw a gun soon."

Oleinik tapped the smiling young fellow sitting next to Andrei on the shoulder—he was a stocky Tartar with dark little buttons of eyes—and said, just as briefly, "Nurgalei, your assistant."

"I help," Nurgalei promised cheerfully. "You show me, then I learn. I understand all kinds machines. You just show me."

"I will," Andrei promised.

"Then everything fine."

Petro Semiglaz, a plump, lively man with a girlish complexion, was fussing round the fire. The gayest and most talkative—enterprising, too, by the look of him—he bustled about breaking branches, feeding the fire and poking into the pots hanging over it. In a little while he spread out a tarpaulin beside the fire and announced, "Supper, boys!"

"Isn't it rather early?" Andrei asked.

"Just a snack until the kitchen comes up. Sit down, chaps."

"He keeps feeding us all the time," Umrikhin explained. "Yes, he's an expert at that. With a man like him you wouldn't go hungry even in a desert. He disappeared for a while this morning and then back he comes lugging a sack of potatoes that almost broke his back. The devil only knows where he got them!"

"Where did I get them? In a field. They had been left there."

Petro Semiglaz began to dish out the potatoes army-fashion, in exactly equal portions, placing two at a time in front of each man. Nurgalei glanced into one of the pots and exclaimed disappointedly in his broken Russian.

"Ah, Petro, you should put chickie in here!"

Semiglaz did not understand. "What?"

"Chickie," Nurgalei repeated quickly.

"What's he talking about? Can't make out a word!"

"He doesn't understand!" Nurgalei looked offended. "You know, hen baby, understand? Little chickie."

Then men roared. Some of them even rolled over by the camp-fire.

"Oh, that's enough! You'll give me the belly-ache!"

"A baby, eh? Boy or girl?"

Nurgalei saw that his comrades were laughing good-naturedly and did not take offence. But his face broke into gleaming perspiration. When the laughter died down and the men had started on the potatoes, he spit something out on to his palm and poked Semiglaz in the ribs.

"You devil! Look what you give!"

"What is it now?"

"Why potatoes grow with iron inside?"

Semiglaz gasped. "Why, it's a shell splinter! From a mortar shell. Those Fritzes were shelling me while I was digging!"

"Heavy fire?" Oleinik asked.

"Uh-huh. They were going off all over the place."
"Did they all explode?"
"Of course."
"Go on, they don't all explode."
"Well, maybe some didn't," Semiglaz readily agreed. "I won't argue, they may not have done."
"That's just the point," Oleinik concluded gloomily. "You may have been in such a hurry, you blighter, you put an unexploded mortar shell in with the potatoes and boiled it. Let's have a look at the pots!"
Again the men rocked with laughter. Nurgalei hugged his stomach and began to roll about on the branches by the fire.
"Oh, I swallowed mine!" he cried. "Here it is! Now it explodes! Step away, please!"
Nurgalei gave such a convincing portrayal of a man waiting in horror for a shell to explode in his stomach that all the others, joining in the spirit of the thing, scattered to the corners of the shelter, hid their heads and laughed for a long time. . . .
"See what kind of a helper you've landed?" Umrikhin said to Andrei when they had all laughed themselves out and gathered in the centre of the shelter again. "A regular actor!"
"He's all right," Andrei agreed. "They're all good. A lively bunch. They'll fight. But what about that one? He looks a bit off colour."
In a corner of the shelter sat Kuzma Yartsev, a thin, bony man with sallow cheeks and tired, sunken eyes. He was the only member of the section who had not laughed. He had been silent all the time. He sat gazing moodily into the fire, his dark, stubbly chin on his knees. Every now and then his body gave a twitch, as though he were going to sleep.
"He's rather queer," Umrikhin whispered in reply. "You'll see for yourself in a minute."

Sergeant Oleinik was summoned by the platoon commander. The men finished the potatoes and, chatting about one thing and another, pulled out their tobacco pouches. Just then Ivan Umrikhin unobtrusively nudged Andrei with his elbow and shouted in his hoarse voice, "Planes!"

Everybody immediately stopped talking to listen for the drone of engines, but Kuzma Yartsev leaped up from his place and dashed out to dive into a slit.

"I hope you go crazy!" Petro Semiglaz yelled at Umrikhin, his nostrils quivering. "I hope you go stone deaf, you madman!"

"But I was warning you," Umrikhin protested.

Again the shelter shook with laughter.

Kuzma Yartsev came back and took his place without a glance at his comrades. Petro Semiglaz followed him with his eyes. "Frightening a man for nothing!" he remarked.

"Up to your tricks again, Ivan?" Andrei snapped out unexpectedly. Everybody fell silent. "Still at it? Perhaps he's really scared, and you—you look out, Ivan, or I'll have a little talk with you that'll make you stutter!"

Umrikhin's feelings were not hurt—he was merely surprised. He looked at Andrei in admiration, lifting his beak of a nose. "Oho! Look at that, eh? So you're going to be even more serious than our late friend Semyon, are you, Andrei? Well, thank God! That suits me very well indeed!"

"I'll suit you, all right!"

Oleinik appeared in the entrance.

"Put out the fires! Fall in!"

... When it was dark Ozerov's regiment set out for the forward lines. The regiment had been assigned to a sector on the right flank of the division. Several small units had been holding this sector for more than a week and were in need of a rest. But before the regiment could

take over, it had to deepen the trenches, build additional dug-outs and blockhouses, and set up command and observation posts. This work it had to complete in two nights, and then it would take up its positions and bar the enemy's path to Moscow.

* XVI *

The regiment returned to camp just before dawn. During the night it had greatly improved the defences. The night had passed quietly, except for several shells a German battery sent over some minutes before the regiment drew back for a rest. One man was killed and three slightly wounded. But everybody in the regiment felt that things had gone well.

In the morning Andrei received a machine-gun. There was something wrong with it, however, and he had to take it to the ordnance shop, which was in a lonely forester's hut about two miles away.

On the way back he took a short-cut. When he had covered about half the distance along the path, he stopped for a smoke near a boggy little stream overgrown with bushes. Something caught his eye in the bushes at the bottom of the steep bank. It was a man. Andrei shook his rifle loose from his shoulder, squatted behind a fir and listened.

"Hey, who's there?" he called out softly after a few seconds.

The willow and black-currant bushes at the edge of the stream shook and there was a squelching sound in the slimy mud. Andrei had not intended to shout, but he suddenly did.

"Halt!'

A pair of hands black with mud shot up over the bushes and the man cried out in a wild, frightened voice, "I'm a friend! Wait, I'm a friend!"

Andrei jumped down the bank.

The man by the stream turned out to be a ranker. In the shadowy light of the forest his sickly face was waxen. He was badly frightened, and kept clasping his muddy hands to his breast.

"Don't shoot! I'm a friend!"

"Yartsev?" Andrei exclaimed in astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't ask me."

"But still—?"

"I lost my way, that's what," Yartsev replied, slumping down beside a currant bush.

Lean and bony, he sat hunched over, trying to clasp his knees in his arms—but his arms shook and would not obey him. Feeling that Andrei was waiting for a more detailed reply, he went on:

"Everything's been going wrong. I went to the medical company with a man from our battalion. You see, I'm just wasting away, and I don't know what from. Well, they kept him there but they sent me back. Gave me these pills. I was on my way back, and all of a sudden the sky's full of planes! I ran off the road and hid, and then I got lost—couldn't find the way. All mixed up! So I've just been roaming around, not knowing which way to go."

Andrei stood facing Yartsev, examining him with a fixed suspicious stare. He could not understand why Yartsev's hands should be trembling so.

"Why are you so scared?"

"Me?" Scared?" He hesitated. "Well, you see, I don't know the place—there are all kinds of people about. . . .

He did not know where to hide his trembling hands. His terror was so evident that Andrei gave a shudder. He could not put his finger on anything, but he felt there was something queer in Yartsev's sitting beside that stream. This spot in the forest which had attracted Yartsev for some reason was now filled with mystery, and

Andrei realized that he could not leave Yartsev here another second, nor stay here with him—something inside Andrei would not allow it.

"Come on!" he ordered. "Kuzma, let's go! Do you hear?"

Yartsev's pale face twisted as though with pain.

"Go?" he asked in a whisper. "Back to the company?"

"Where else?"

Yartsev began to tremble from head to foot. Even by the pale light in the forest Andrei could see his eyes glaze over. Yartsev heaved a despairing sigh, as though bidding farewell to the world, then suddenly rolled over on his side and began to snatch at the bottom branches of the currant bush and pull them to his chest.

"Kuzma! What's the matter?"

"I can't stand it," Yartsev whispered weakly.

"What are you playing at?"

These words brought Yartsev to his senses. He rose quickly.

"What's that?" he asked, trying to get a grip on himself. "Just a second—I'm coming."

All the way back Andrei was silent, but Yartsev, walking beside him, for some reason talked continuously about his family.

* XVII *

When he heard the drone of engines Kuzma Yartsev dived into his slit as usual. The planes passed over, flying east, but even then he lay listening for a long time, cautiously glancing up into the sky. Sergeant Oleinik who was passing at the time stopped beside the slit.

"Yartsev!" he called out sternly.

"Here, Comrade Sergeant!"

"Come with me—to the Company Commander!"

With a quick movement Kuzma Yartsev raised the rim

of his helmet from his eyes. A cold pallor suffused his thin cheeks. He stood motionless for a few seconds, unable to hear anything for the noise in his chest and head. Looking down at him angrily, Oleinik beckoned with his finger. Yartsev leaned against the edge of the slit and began to clutch at the grass to pull himself out, but there was no strength in his hands.

Oleinik bent over him. "Give me your hand! You are some soldier, you are!" Yartsev's body had become strangely heavy and Oleinik had difficulty in pulling him out of the slit.

Sergeant Oleinik strode into the heart of the forest without glancing back. Well-built and agile, he moved with a springy, animal-like gait, now and then adjusting the sub-machine gun slung over his shoulder. Yartsev had a hard time keeping up with him: his chest felt so choked there seemed little room left for his heart. Seizing hold of a bush, he halted and cried weakly, "Wait!"

Oleinik glanced over his shoulder.

"Come on!"

"Tell me, is it true?"

"Come on!"

After that Yartsev had no recollection of where Oleinik led him. When he came to himself he saw that he was sitting on the ground in a dense thicket. Opposite him, on a rotting log, sat the Sergeant; his black eyes, shaped like a cat's, glittered behind a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Where are we?" Yartsev whispered breathlessly.

"Wipe your face. Scratched yourself all over in the bushes. No, you haven't got any guts. You're a weakling. I didn't know it. If I had, I shouldn't have got tied up with such a rabbit. Wipe it properly!"

"You've done me in," Yartsev whispered.

"Should have. What's a creature like you got to live for?"

They were silent for a minute. Oleinik listened intently, his slanting eyes shifting from side to side. Gunfire could be heard in the distance. Somewhere far from the thicket soldiers were talking. But round them there was only the oppressive silence of the forest. Dropping his voice Oleinik finally asked, "Well, comrade deserter, so you got caught, eh?"

Yartsev let his breath out in a deep sigh. "No luck."

"How did he find you?"

Kuzma Yartsev described how he had made his way into the depths of the forest from the medical company, intending to wait there until dark and then leave the front, and how Andrei Lopukhov had come upon him by accident.

"You didn't have any luck, chum, did you!"

Oleinik rose and, narrowing his eyes, stared fixedly at Yartsev.

"Get up!"

"You ... you ... what do you want?" Yartsev could barely get to his feet.

Sergeant Oleinik shifted his shoulders slightly and, without moving from the spot, gave Yartsev a terrific punch on the jaw. With a groan Yartsev fell on his back beside a buckthorn bush, but then quickly rose to his knees. Leaning on his hands, he said quietly, "Don't hit me!" and burst into tears.

"You bastard!" Oleinik said, also quietly. He sat down on the rotting log again. "Wipe that mug of yours again!"

He flicked aside the stub of his cigarette and rolled himself another.

"Will he give you away?"

"Don't think so," Yartsev answered.

"Don't think so? Then why did you get so scared when I ordered you to go to the Company Commander?"

"It's my heart. You know the kind of heart I have."

Yartsev screwed up his face. "But he shouldn't give me away. He may suspect something, but he can't prove it. Why couldn't I have lost my way? I don't know the place. . . ."

Oleinik, however, did not seem very impressed by Yartsev's assurances.

"You're a fool!" he said presently. "So you ran away! I told you that's what would happen. They found you without even looking for you! And suppose they'd searched for you? Where'd you have gone? Where'd you have hidden? Suppose you even got back to the rear. Would it be for long? Every woman would fly at your throat. Or don't you know how they look on men like that back there?"

"I have someone else's papers."

"So much the worse!"

"I could live in the forest for a time."

Oleinik scowled. "And then?"

"And then perhaps the war would end. . . . You said yourself it might end soon."

Oleinik was still unable to check his agitation; he kept working his thin lips and throwing angry glances at Yartsev.

"Yes, I did!" he admitted in a furious whisper. "And more than once. It has to end soon. Look at those Germans—right on top of Moscow! Who's going to turn them back?"

"That's just what I'm saying—"

"What he's saying!" Again Oleinik scowled viciously. "The war'll end soon, but the question is will you live to see it? I tell you again: in the rear every single woman'll take you by the scruff of the neck like a puppy! Can't you get that into your head?"

"But I'll get killed here anyway!"

"Here?" Oleinik was so tense that beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. "That's right! It'll be even

worse here! In the rear you may last a week, or even two, but here—if there's a battle tomorrow you'll have had your time. A bullet is bad enough, but suppose you get your insides splashed all over a tree! The infantry!" He spat in disgust through his big yellow teeth. "There's no safety in the rear, and here there's even less!"

Kuzma Yartsev sat with his bony shoulders hunched up high. His unsuccessful attempt to run away had so discouraged him that now he had no strength left at all. At the thought that he would soon have to go into battle his chest contracted until he could hardly breathe. How he yearned at that moment for just a single friendly word! But Oleinik kept boring and boring away at him; his venom and conviction that they were doomed struck terror into Yartsev's heart.

"Don't, Yakov, don't," Yartsev begged, pale and shaky.

Oleinik raised his voice slightly. "But we can! We can save ourselves!"

"Again the same thing," Yartsev said plaintively.

"Of course the same thing!"

Oleinik rose. He stood for a moment, listening, and cast his eyes warily, like a cat, about the thicket. Nothing disturbed the silence. He sat down again in the same place, drew a pink sheet from inside his shirt and handed it to Yartsev.

"Read that! The latest."

The leaflet shook in Yartsev's hands.

"See what it says? And there's even a picture of. . . ." Oleinik dropped his voice to a whisper. "That's our only way out—to cross over. If we do we stay alive!"

Yartsev closed his eyes and shook his head.

"I can't. My wife, you know yourself, she's a very sick woman, and there's a houseful of kids. If I go, what'll happen to them?"

Oleinik took back the leaflet, crumpled it in his fist, pushed it under the log and let loose a flood of invective.

"You're not a man, you're a damn jellyfish! It makes me sick to look at you. If you're going to get away you've got to use your head and not do what you did today. You have to be reported missing! Missing—and that's the end of it! Perhaps your woman'll shed a few tears."

Even before reaching the front they had more than once discussed running away, but Yartsev had always refused. This time, too, he refused flatly.

"Don't try to talk me into it, Yakov! I'm not going any farther away from home. I won't gain a thing by crossing over. Besides, the Germans are no friends of mine."

"They're no friends of mine either," Oleinik rejoined. "The only thing is, we all dry our boots in the same sun. I know they aren't going to meet us with open arms, and I don't expect it."

"Open arms? They'll string us up as soon as they look at us! That's what those who got out of there say. They burn people alive and hang them!"

"Nonsense! We know—that's all propaganda. Who says that? Just the Communists! You can be sure they won't string everybody up!" Oleinik dropped his head and glanced sideways at the bony figure of Yartsev, who was brooding dejectedly. Then he continued, now choosing his words slowly, "Of course there's nothing for Communists to do over there. But what about you? They'll make you sweat, that's true. You can't get away from that. But if you last out to the end of the war everything'll be fine. Those Germans won't be here forever." He gave a start and again looked fixedly at Yartsev, bringing the pupils of his eyes slightly together. "What—did the Bolsheviks make such a fuss of you? How long did you spend in jail to please them? A year, wasn't it?"

"Almost a year," Yartsev replied in a toneless voice.

"Well, I didn't, but I was going to," Oleinik said, controlling his agitation. "It looked certain. When I think of my father I boil all over inside! I'll never forget that!"

There was a swish in the branches near by, and a second later the top of the young fir that grew beside the log swayed slightly. Yartsev flung himself down sideways and clawed at the ground. But Oleinik did not stir a muscle. He spat derisively through his yellowed teeth.

"Did it kill you? Or not yet?"

"Who's that?" Yartsev whispered.

"Yes, no guts, no guts at all!"

Yartsev raised himself slightly. "Who was that?"

"A squirrel, you fool!" And when Yartsev had again squatted on his skinny haunches, like an old hound, Oleinik said firmly, "Well? Let's have your final decision."

"No, Yakov. I'm not going."

"Going to try to desert again?"

"No, I won't."

"Oho! So you're going to fight?"

"No, not that either. How can I?"

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I'll think it over."

There was silence. Then Oleinik brought the conversation to a close.

"Well, think it over. As for me, there's no reason why I should get killed at my age. If you don't want to go along, then good-bye. As soon as there's a chance I'll cross over. Don't be sore because I smacked you in the jaw. You needed it. Mebbe it'll do you good. That's all!" Then he added threateningly, "Mind you don't get any crazy ideas about splitting on me! Or you'll get a bullet through you fast enough! Just remember."

With that he rose from the log.

* XVIII *

At the Army Headquarters to which he and his men were sent, Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann supplied important information about the preparations the Germans were making for new attacks. His statements were confirmed: German troop movements and the transfer of tanks and artillery to the forward positions were spotted on several sectors, including the one opposite General Borodin's division. After that, Major Ozerov unexpectedly received a new order: as soon as it was dark he was to send two battalions up to the front lines not only for fortification work but simultaneously to take up permanent defence positions. One battalion was to remain behind in reserve. In addition they had to keep the enemy under constant observation and capture a prisoner that same night to ascertain the exact time the Germans planned to launch their new attack on the division's sector.

Major Ozerov immediately summoned Yurgin.

"Look here, my Siberian neighbour," he said worriedly as he continued to make marks on the map. "We need a 'tongue.' "

Yurgin looked at the Regiment Commander with his usual self-assurance, and answered unhurriedly, "We'll get one, Comrade Major. I'll go myself."

" 'Myself'!" Ozerov lifted his eyes from the map. "Don't you think I could get a 'tongue' myself? You won't be much of a commander if you do everything yourself. You've got to have confidence in the men as well as yourself, you know. Arrange it. Pick dependable men, tell them what to do and how to do it—and then let them go ahead. I'll give them detailed instructions when they are ready to go."

"Yes, Comrade Major! May I go now?"

"Wait. . . ." Ozerov looked through the contents of his

map case and drew out a little booklet. "Here's something about reconnaissance. It's very useful. Read it through and act on it. We all have to study, old chap."

... In Oleinik's section makhorka was being distributed. The indefatigable Petro Semiglaz had volunteered for the job. He had spread out the makhorka on a cape-tent and was running his fingers through it. His nostrils twitched eagerly.

"Anybody got a measure?"

A measure could not be found. Then Umrikhin quickly stepped up to the heap of makhorka.

"Stop!" he said, pushing Petro's hand aside. "If there's no measure then we don't trust you. I can see your nostrils twitching! Anything else, but on makhorka you'll cheat us. I can see that!"

Petro was hurt. "Me? Cheat you?"

"That's right!"

"He's crazy, honest to God, he's crazy!"

For some reason the fact that Petro Semiglaz' honesty had been questioned tickled everybody, and to see what would happen they sided with Umrikhin.

"Let someone else!"

"Move over, Petro!"

"You just wait!" Semiglaz threatened.

Umrikhin continued to play the boss.

"Who's going to share it out? It's a serious business."

"Let Andrei do it, shall we?" Nurgalei Hasanov suggested quickly, his eyes flashing.

"Yes, he's dependable," Umrikhin put in.

They all agreed readily.

"You share it out, Andrei!"

"And hurry up, I want to smoke!"

Andrei divided the makhorka into equal piles, one for each man in the section. Petro Semiglaz immediately stretched out his hand towards one of them.

Andrei stopped him. "Wait a minute."

"Going to do a little hocus-pocus?"

"Turn round," Andrei said to Nurgalei. When Nurgalei had turned round Andrei put his hand over one of the piles and said, "Who gets this?"

Nurgalei was very pleased at this soldier's fair method of sharing out.

"Petro Five-Eyes,"* he answered smartly. Then he checked himself and exclaimed, "Oi, no, I made mistake! Six-Eyes! Oi, no! Wait just minute, I got to count his name!"

The section roared with laughter.

"You little squirt!" Petro burst out good-naturedly. "And he has the nerve to laugh!"

A minute later all of them were puffing away.

Lieutenant Yurgin appeared in the entrance of the shelter. Oleinik sprang nimbly to his feet.

"'Ten-shun!"

Yurgin waved his hand. "As you were." Without stepping in he asked, "Any of you men like to do some scouting?"

"Scouting?" Oleinik stepped forward and answered eagerly, "I should, Comrade Lieutenant! I want to go scouting very much. I've been wanting to for a long time."

"All right, I'll call for you...."

Andrei came forward from a corner of the shelter.

"I'll go too," he said simply.

The third man to volunteer for the night patrol was Terenti Zhigalov.

"I served three years in the scouts!" he said excitedly. "I've been in action with them. I've got to go! I know those Germans, those...." He became incoherent. "Those ... bastards!" And he suddenly struck the shelter pole so hard that dry fir needles showered down over the fire.

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* Literally the name Semiglaz means Seven-Eyes.—*Tr.*

Yurgin was pleased; he liked all the volunteers. "Fine," he said. "You're just the kind of men I was looking for. That's enough. The less men on a night patrol the better. You have to work silently. So get ready and come along with me now."

The remaining hours until evening Oleinik, Andrei, and Zhigalov spent at the observation post. They carefully studied the terrain, selecting their route to the German positions.

Major Ozerov gave them the necessary instructions and after midnight the scouts crossed the trench and cautiously made their way westwards in single file along a narrow gully. All was quiet at the front. A fog lay on the ground. The moon peeped out at rare intervals, sleepily and unwillingly, spreading a sickly, cheerless light over the sky.

The German line on this sector was dispersed. Preparing to take up the offensive again, the Germans had their units stationed in the villages and woods, with only small outposts at the forward lines. One of these outposts had been spotted during the day on a low hill scattered with bushes. The scouts headed for the hill.

They never reached it, however.

Halfway there Terenti Zhigalov, who, being an experienced scout, was in front, halted in a clump of bushes. He wanted to listen to the night sounds and discuss with his comrades what to do next. To hurry Oleinik and Andrei along, he gave an impatient squeak in imitation of an injured animal. Just then a report sounded to the left of him and something hissed like an angry snake. With a shower of sparks a rocket shot up over the bushes. Such a bright light flooded the earth that the scouts froze in their tracks. A second later German sub-machine guns began to cross-stitch the air.

Blinded by the glare of the rocket, Andrei threw himself to the ground. He rolled into a hole—and his heart missed a beat. It turned out to be a bomb crater. Sergeant Oleinik, the last in line, wriggled into some bushes. "They'll kill me," he thought "and that'll be the end!" Both Andrei and Oleinik realized they had run into a group of Germans—probably out on a night patrol too.

Terenti Zhigalov remained in front.

He saw that the job had fallen through and decided to crawl back unobserved to where his comrades were, without opening fire. Quickly, like a lizard, he crept through the damp, rotting grass. The noise of firing stopped. He was just about to get to his feet when two burly Germans pounced on him out of the bushes. For several seconds he struggled silently to throw them off; only when they twisted his arms back and lifted him off the earth, and he glimpsed a faint sliver of the moon dropping from the sky, did he cry out, "A-a-a-a! Here!"

His hoarse, agonized cry carried far in the night. Andrei scrambled up and looked out of the crater. He guessed at once what had happened. He heard the thud of blows, a heavy groan, and then, farther away, a wild shrieking voice, not at all like the voice of Terenti Zhigalov, ". . . r-ro . . . thers, shoot! Don't be afraid! Shoot!"

Andrei understood that Zhigalov wanted him to shoot. But how could he?—he might kill Zhigalov along with the Germans. Sweat streamed down his face. There was silence for a few seconds, and then from ahead came Zhigalov's broken, heart-rending cries. He caught only fragments of words, gasping and groaning. But suddenly, from far off, one word rang out clearly, as it always does in war, "Fire!"

There was so much soul-searing force in that word that Andrei knew he must fire. It was an order to be

fulfilled unconditionally. With a moan he levelled his sub-machine gun and pressed the trigger. The gun kicked back at his shoulder as though it wanted to leap out of his hands. Ahead in the darkness bushes rustled and howls rang out....

A panting figure rushed at him from the side. Andrei had just time to turn and lunge with his gun. Then he threw himself on the fallen man.

They grappled in the thick wet grass, grunting. Andrei found his hand on the face of his enemy, and with a strength trebled by fury he tore at the man's nose, his eyes, his lips.... Then, remembering he had a knife, he began to fumble hastily for it at his belt but felt himself falling back from a strong blow in the chest. He just managed to save himself by fastening his fingers into his enemy's coat, and they rolled together head over heels to the bottom of the crater. Only here did Andrei manage to pin the German down. He pulled out his knife. He did not know where the blow landed, but there was a harsh crunching sound.

Withdrawing the knife, he flung it aside with a shiver of disgust, forgetting in his haste that he might still need it. The German began to twist and thrash his arms. Andrei saw that he had not killed him. Forgetting that he was unarmed, he again threw himself on the German, panting with fear, and pressed him to the ground. It was now that he uttered his first cry, "Sergeant, help!"

Oleinik's voice came from the edge of the crater, "Where are you? Where are you?"

"Down here!"

Oleinik sprang down right on top of Andrei.

"What's the matter with you?" Andrei asked, pushing him aside with his shoulder.

"Damn!" Oleinik muttered. "It's so dark!"

"Help me!" Andrei breathed once more.

The German twisted again and emitted a wheezing sound in an attempt to cry out. Andrei hit him in the face, covered his mouth and then hastily gagged him with a piece of cloth he had brought along for that purpose.

"Where the hell did he come from?" he whispered, relieved now that the German was weak and had quietened down. "Here, I'll drag him and you follow. Only we'll have to hurry! Pick up my gun. It's here somewhere!"

The German machine-guns were still chattering; red tracer bullets streaked over their heads.

"How can you take him? They're firing all round," Oleinik said anxiously.

"I'll drag him through! Along the gully!"

He took the German by the arms and hoisted him up. Then he settled him on his back, as he had been used to with heavy loads, and climbed cautiously out of the hole.

"Come on! If anything happens, give me covering fire!"

In the German advance posts machine-guns clamoured nervously; signal rockets trembled in the sky and scattered blossoms of light. Streams of bullets swept the field. Bending low, Andrei walked along with big strides, not glancing back. The German's feet dragged on the ground.

Oleinik walked behind. All the way out he had been thinking about desertion. He had been thinking about desertion until the moment the Germans seized Terenti Zhigalov. Then he had been so astounded by Zhigalov's plea and Andrei's firing that somehow he had forgotten all about it. Only now, after he had taken a hundred paces behind Andrei, did he remember. "Where the hell can I go now?" he thought, shrinking as the bullets whistled close by. "If you stick your nose out of this

gully you've had your time. And I can't hang back now. If they catch me I'm done for. They'll see straightaway I was out scouting...." So he followed Lopukhov and watched carefully to be sure he did not lose him in the misty hollow.

A hundred yards from the trench he caught up with Andrei. "Heavy?" he asked, falling into step with him.

"Yes, damn him! I'm sweating." Andrei stopped. "He stinks too—smells like a dog."

"Better take a rest," Oleinik suggested. "Let me carry him a little. Is he alive, though?"

"Yes, he's still alive. But he must have lost a lot of blood."

"All right, let me have him."

As he lowered the German to the ground Andrei said bitterly, "What do you think of Terenti, eh? As long as I live I'll never forget him!"

"Yes, he got it."

"And the way it happened!"

Oleinik lugged the German to the shelter from which they had started out on the patrol. The men had been waiting for them anxiously: they all realized something had gone wrong. The moment Oleinik laid the German on the ground voices rose on all sides and torches began to flash. The first to come up was Lieutenant Yurgin.

"Oleinik? Is that you? Where are the others?"

As he neared the shelter Andrei heard someone in the trench say enthusiastically, "I say, chaps, that Sergeant Oleinik's the man, isn't he? That's the stuff! He's brought in a tongue. Go and have a look. Over there, near the shelter."

Yurgin reported the results of the patrol to Ozerov by telephone. The latter ordered Yurgin, Lopukhov and Oleinik to come to the regiment command post at once with the German.

The German prisoner turned out to be a senior corporal. He died just before sunrise, but he managed to say that the Germans would strike at the sector held by the division on the morning of November the Seventh.

* XIX *

Captain Sharakshaneh's battalion was in reserve.

That evening it was to move up to the advance positions.

At sunrise, when Oleinik and Andrei were still at the regiment command post, Kuzma Yartsev, one of the last to wake up, crawled out to the fire, trembling violently. He stretched out his hands over the flames.

"Where did you pick up such a trembling fit?" Petro Semiglaz asked in wonder.

"I'm fro-ozen," Yartsev answered.

"If you ask me, it's your soul not your belly that makes you shake."

"Can't your soul freeze?"

"Depends on the soul!"

The kitchen came up. They all went over to it with their mess-tins. On the way back to the shelter Umrikhin turned his mess-tin in his hands and remarked despondently, "The cook's got a bit stingy today."

"What's the matter, not enough?"

"Just take a look. Call that a portion?"

"Army rations—what do you expect?" Semiglaz said. "You won't die of starvation, but you won't chase after the women either."

"Did you hear what happened to us once?" Umrikhin said, still not touching his porridge. "A General was passing through, and he comes up to the kitchen, you know, bags of gold braid. That was at the Velikaya River, when we were stationed there.... Well, he asks the men, 'How about it, comrades, get enough to eat?' Of

course we all answer together as we're supposed to, 'Enough, Comrade General, there's even some left over!' 'Left over?' says the General. 'And what do you do with the left-overs?' 'Eat 'em up, Comrade General, and there's not even enough of them!' "

As soon as Umrikhin had put away his portion of porridge, before all the rest, Petro Semiglaz placed a second mess-tin in front of him. Anxious to placate Umrikhin so that he would trust him to divide the makhorka, Petro winked at him as one conspirator to another.

"Tuck in," he said. "I got it for you."

Umrikhin looked at the mess-tin. "Whose is it?"

"Why—Terenti Zhigalov's. The cook doesn't know about him yet, so I took it—"

"You fool! Take it back!"

Medvedev and Kovalchuk, who were the saddest of all that morning, told how they had got to know Terenti Zhigalov in the hospital near Moscow. He had had a very bad time while a prisoner of the Germans and he was a sick man, yet he had always been straining to get back to the front and fight the enemy.

"He went back to the lines without even finishing his cure," Kovalchuk said. "You saw those fits he had, didn't you?"

"Plenty of fire that boy had," Medvedev said. "And what a way to die, just imagine! If he'd only lived long enough he'd have been a Hero of the whole Soviet Union, take my life on it! Why, every fibre of him was straining to go into battle!"

"Yes, he was a Party man too," Umrikhin sighed.

"Like our late Semyon Degtyarev. They were both the same kind."

"He hadn't joined the Party yet," Kovalchuk remarked. "He was only in the Komsomol. . . ."

"Doesn't matter. He was a Party man by nature," Umrikhin insisted. "You could see it. Yes, the more I look round, the more I see it's Party men like that who get killed first. There was our Commissar, Comrade Yakhno—he got killed, too. And what a man he was! All quicksilver! Yes, with people like that it's probably true that every fibre is just straining to go into battle. . . ."

Kuzma Yartsev stared long at Zhigalov's mess-tin and pondered on his sudden and tragic death. Then he set aside his own mess-tin and, forgetting to take his spoon with him, unobtrusively slipped out of the shelter.

A German mortar battery was pounding away at the forward positions. A biting north wind rustled the trees. Even in the forest it was bitterly cold. All the men had taken to the dug-outs and shelters, from which threads of smoke curled up through the thick branches of the firs.

That morning found Kuzma Yartsev especially upset. And not only by Zhigalov's death. He had been certain that Oleinik would go over to the Germans during the scouting patrol. When he learned that Oleinik had come back he grew frightened, he himself did not know why. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that Oleinik's changing his mind for some reason or other did not concern him, his anxiety did not diminish. His troubled mind told him that Oleinik's return not only broke their agreement but boded some kind of evil.

He recalled all his meetings and conversations with Oleinik. They both came from the same district on the River Oka. Kuzma Yartsev, who had not wished to join the collective farm, worked in a manufacturing co-operative; Oleinik was a travelling fur buyer. They used to meet only rarely and had not known each other well. In the army, however, they had become friends, as men from the same place do when far from home. Knowing that Yartsev had a grudge against the Soviet government (just before the war he had served about a year in pris-

on for profiteering), and that he was very much afraid of death, Oleinik cautiously and unhurriedly began to persuade him to desert. Lonely and terrified, Kuzma Yartsev had become close friends with Oleinik. His talks with Oleinik were his only consolation and kept alive his spark of faith that somehow he could escape from the war and death.

However, Kuzma Yartsev was afraid to go over to the Germans. To desert and last out to the end of the war in the rear was no easy matter either, particularly as it was also dangerous. What was there left to do? How could he save himself from certain death?

Kuzma Yartsev wandered off, his mind disordered by his worries, and about two hundred yards from the camp came out into a large clearing. At the eastern end of the clearing there was a sharp rise topped by a clump of bushy young pines. He headed for this place to sit down and consider calmly what to do—how to save himself from getting killed. At the foot of the rise gaped a big fresh bomb crater. He stopped beside it. "They'll throw me into a hole like this," he thought, "and it'll be the end of everything." He closed his eyes, and before him spread the battlefield he had often seen in his dreams; he saw the survivors dragging his bloody corpse to just such a bomb crater—and he was left utterly powerless to combat his terror.

He remembered nothing clearly after that. In a daze, he sat by the crater for a long time, crying without restraint. Then he was in the shelter, and then he was wandering about somewhere, vainly seeking peace of mind and a way out.

Near midday some men found him in a clump of low bushes not far from the battalion's camp. He was thrashing about on the ground and moaning.

His left wrist had been smashed by a bullet. On the ground near by lay a rifle.

A crow flapped wearily over the clearing. At the sight of the bird Kuzma Yartsev realized that evening was approaching. A magnificent blood-red sun hung low over the forest in the frosty haze of the air; it hung there undecidedly, as though it had lost its usual landmarks.

Far ahead of him Kuzma Yartsev saw two rows of soldiers. Above their heads glittered bayonets. He could not distinguish the faces of the soldiers. A split second later the rows were suddenly very near, but even then he noted with surprise that they all looked alike—they even had identical faces and eyes. "What company is that?" flashed through his mind. "Ours? What's it doing here?" Looking about, he saw that he was standing at the foot of the same rise he had come to in the morning. Behind him was the fresh bomb crater. And then everything that had happened that day came back to him.

In the afternoon there had been a court-martial. Yartsev had said nothing in his own defence. He had nothing to say. Crazed as he had been by fear, it had not entered his mind that his crime would be exposed without any difficulty. Realizing that to attempt to justify himself would be useless, he pleaded guilty at once. As he began to tell the court how he had committed his crime, he suddenly felt a great load drop from his shoulders, and he strove to recall all his actions and thoughts that morning. But the judge brusquely cut him short, saying this had no bearing on the case. After that Yartsev saw clearly that he would be shot, and probably very soon. He would not even live until evening. Death was absolutely inevitable, and very close. As he stood before the court-martial Yartsev realized that death was now closer than it ever could have been in battle. Before, giving in to his fear, he had been convinced that as soon as he went into battle he would be killed. But here suddenly came the very simple thought that if he went into battle now, it was by no means certain that he would be killed.

Nobody could be certain of that. After all, men fought for years, fought in numerous battles, and came through unscathed. And with the desperation of a condemned man, Kuzma Yartsev clung to the thought that he could find his salvation in battle.

But it was too late.

When he saw himself standing beside the fresh crater, and when he realized that he had been led out for execution, Kuzma Yartsev suddenly felt that he had more strength and vitality than for many days past. One of the members of the tribunal stood in front of the assembled soldiers and read out the verdict of the court-martial. Then Battalion Commander Captain Sharakshaneh, a tall, quick-moving Buryat, began to speak to the soldiers. Kuzma Yartsev caught only his question, "Who wishes to shoot this traitor to his country? Any volunteers? Two paces forward!"

Andrei stood in the centre of the front rank. All day he had felt as if he were in a dream. Terenti Zhigalov's act had shaken him up and forced him to reconsider his point of view on many things. It made Kuzma Yartsev's crime—the gravest a soldier could commit in war-time—all the more despicable in his eyes. But this was not all that agitated Andrei. Inwardly he felt that a share of the guilt lay with him as well; when he met Yartsev in the forest he had suspected that fear was beginning to lead the man to treason, but he had refrained from telling his commanders about it—he had taken pity on Yartsev, who all the way back had spoken so feelingly about his family. Now Andrei realized that in war there could be no pity either for the enemy, or, if it came to that, for one's own people either. And so, after the Battalion Commander's question he was the first to step forward. He glanced at Yartsev as he had at the Germans in Sukhaya Polyana—with an intense black glitter in his eyes.

"I do!" he said, his lips twitching violently.

Sergeant Oleinik saw that in another instant both ranks would step forward. To anticipate them he quickly stepped up beside Andrei.

"I do!"

After him all the men stepped forward. Andrei and Oleinik were again in the centre of the front rank.

"Five men are needed," Sharakshaneh said.

A minute later five men armed with rifles were before Yartsev. They were all the same, like so many twin brothers. Yet one, in the centre, seemed more familiar than the rest. Yartsev stared at him. This familiar figure was taller than the others, lean, swarthy of skin, and on the collar of his greatcoat gleamed sergeant's insignia.

"Oleinik?"

For some reason Kuzma Yartsev had not once thought of Oleinik either during the trial or after it. When he saw him now he threw up his hands and leaned forward to shout something.

But just then the volley rang out. Yartsev was buried in the bomb crater.

* XX *

All night long Ozerov's regiment continued to build up the defences in its sector. Hundreds of spades rang against the earth as the men deepened the winding trenches. In many places special squads were putting the finishing touches to blockhouses and dug-outs, dragging logs out of the forest through the mire, and camouflaging them with sod, branches and rotting grass. Anti-tank guns were set up where they were likely to be most needed. The German side was absolutely silent. Only towards midnight squadrons of German bombers flew over in the direction of Moscow, shattering the heavens with their roar. After that many of the men kept glancing back as

they worked, and soon they saw what they had been waiting for: hundreds of sharp blades of fire began to pierce the black sky in the east. Voices rose in the trenches:

"They've greeted those bastards!"

"They'll greet them, all right! It'll be a warm welcome!"

"Dig! What are you stopping for?"

At dawn the groups of sappers who had been laying mines in front of the defences began to return. One of the groups came up to the section of the trench held by Matvei Yurgin's platoon. They were dragging a soldier on a cape-tent. Carefully they lowered him into the trench.

"What's the matter with him? Wounded?" Yurgin asked. "One of your men?"

"He was crawling," one of the sappers said briefly.

"Where to?"

"Here, of course."

"Who is he?"

"Looks as if he's the only one who knows that."

Matvei Yurgin turned his torch on the wounded man. He was unconscious. His face and his clothes were bloody and covered with mud. It was hard to believe that only a short while ago he could have been crawling. It was hard to believe that he could be alive.

"He was crawling, you say?" Yurgin asked.

"Crawling," the sapper sighed. "It's just a miracle. He was moaning and crawling, scratching at the earth, like this. As soon as we spoke to him he fainted."

Andrei came up along the trench from the other side. He squatted beside the wounded man's head and looked into his face by the light of the torch.

"Zhigalov?" he exclaimed in a startled voice. Then he cried out wildly, "Terenti! Zhigalov! Terenti!"

Terenti Zhigalov recovered consciousness while his face was being washed; they had decided to do that

before putting him on a stretcher and taking him to the nearest medical aid station. He must have realized from the careful and affectionate way his face was wiped that he was among his own men. His face twisted plaintively, but he had no strength left for tears. He began to move his lips, and Yurgin bent over to catch the words.

"Where . . . is he?" Zhigalov whispered distinctly.

Some of the men thought Zhigalov was raving, but Andrei guessed he wanted to see him. He leaned over the stretcher. Andrei's lips trembled and tears filmed his eyes. His secret thoughts in the past twenty-four hours had been concentrated mainly on what had happened to Zhigalov.

"Here I am, Terenti! Here I am."

Zhigalov tried to speak but only groaned. Then he said quite clearly, "Thanks, friend. . . ."

When Zhigalov had been taken away nobody moved for a minute.

"Just think of it: crawled all day and all night!" Osip Chernyshov said, shaking his head. "Why, he must have been bleeding to death! What kept him alive? And what's keeping him alive now?"

"He'll stay alive, too," Yurgin said. "A man like him must live."

Breakfast was brought up. The men went into the dug-outs with their mess-tins.

After breakfast everybody lay down to rest. Andrei, however, did not feel like lying down. For a long time he could not compose himself. Life persistently kept teaching him hatred for his enemies and love for his country, and Andrei thrilled as he felt these lessons become part of his flesh and blood, like the air he breathed; and, like air, they were infusing his heart with a new strength he had never known before.

He stepped outside.

It was broad daylight. Guns were beginning to rumble on the flanks, but the regiment's sector was still silent. Here and there the helmets of observers glinted in the trenches. A cold north wind was blowing. The bushes and grass beyond the trench were coated with hoar-frost. Winter was in the air.

Matvei Yurgin's platoon had been stationed on a level, open stretch of land. From the central dug-out of the platoon, where Oleinik's section was quartered, a winding communication trench led back to Sharakshaneh's observation post on a small height and farther on to a low wood drastically thinned by shelling and chopping. To the west, where the enemy was entrenched, spread a large undulating field; behind it, like a rusty iron fence, rose a jagged band of forest, with two half-demolished huts at its edge. On a rise in the very centre of the field stood a slender white birch-tree; it seemed to be standing there undecidedly, wondering where to flee from that dangerous spot.

For some reason it reminded Andrei of the one on the roadside just outside Olkhovka, although both before and since he had seen many such solitary birches that autumn. He recalled the night he had spent at home, Maryika, his parents and his brother, and many other things that had become firmly fixed in his memory on that day, filled with the noise of wind and falling leaves. He recalled everything vividly but, strangely enough, it all seemed to have happened not a month ago but far back in the past—in his youth or childhood.

There was one other man in the section who did not lie down for a long time that morning—Sergeant Oleinik. Soon after breakfast he too climbed out of the dug-out and, on seeing Andrei, came up to him with his silent, cat-like tread.

"Looking at something?" he asked Andrei from behind.

Andrei tore his glance away from the field.

"Good spot here," Oleinik said, stepping up beside him. "Look at the field of fire. Infantry can never get through—they'll be mowed down by machine-guns. And look at that landmark over there."

"Where?"

"There, on that rise."

"Landmark. . . ." Andrei murmured thoughtfully, and then added with a sigh, "It's a birch, a little white birch-tree, that's what it is. When I look at it I can see the whole of our Russian land." He fell silent for a moment. "Hard luck for her to have to stand in such a place."

"Yes, right in the line of fire."

Thus, talking about the birch-tree, they greeted their first morning at the forward positions.

* XXI *

The second morning at the forward lines—the morning of a holiday, November 7th—Ozerov's men greeted with a feeling of alarm; they all knew that the Germans were planning to attack their division's sector that day.

Lieutenant Matvei Yurgin lived with Oleinik's section in the central dug-out of the platoon. Out of habit he awoke at dawn. All around him in the darkness men were snoring under their greatcoats on the low bunks. They had been up late the evening before, preparing for battle; they had stripped and cleaned their guns and stocked up with cartridges, grenades and fire bottles. Then Goncharov, the company political instructor, had come in and talked to them about the great anniversary on the morrow. They had sat up for a long time reminiscing about all the good ways they used to celebrate the holiday in peace-time. This had stirred them so much that it was midnight before they lay down to sleep.

In the middle of the night it suddenly began to snow. For more than an hour the snow fell in thick, slanting

sheets, like a heavy downpour of rain, and then a howling blizzard arose. By dawn the blizzard had changed the appearance of the entire area around Moscow. It had thickly blanketed the fields, filled in the gullies, blocked the forests and plastered the windward sides of all the trees with snow. An unusually early winter had come, and come to stay.

Matvei Yurgin did not wish to waken the men before time, so he sat quietly on his bunk, going over the events of the summer in his mind. The air in the dug-out was heavy from the pent-up smells of clothing, damp earth, fir branches, and mouldy straw. In a small niche in a corner of the dug-out a smoky little lamp flickered faintly.

"Wonder what the trench is like," Yurgin thought. "Probably full of snow."

He cautiously let himself down from the bunk, adjusted the wick of the lamp and lit the sticks in the stove. His ear caught a sound and then the crunch of snow on the other side of the cape-tent hanging over the entrance to the dug-out. He moved aside the edge of the cape-tent and through the snow saw the figure of a soldier with a rifle.

"Still alive in there?" the sentry asked. "I smelt smoke."

"That you, Medvedev? Still blowing?"

"It is."

"Piled up high?"

"In the trench, you mean? In places it's blocked solid, Comrade Lieutenant. Just look at me." He clapped his mittens together. "It's snowing hard and it's freezing cold—like Siberia."

"All quiet?"

"Yes, so far."

Yurgin walked over to the bunks and nudged Oleinik.

The Sergeant jumped up in alarm. "Eh?"

"Wake up the men," Yurgin ordered. "The trenches have to be cleared before it gets light. We'll be floundering in snow if the battle starts. Jump to it. I'm going off to wake the other sections."

The platoon set to clearing the trenches with a will.

Half an hour later a messenger from the Company Commander ran up—a bright-eyed young soldier no taller than a rifle, plastered with snow from head to foot. As he came down the main trench he bumped into Umrikhin, who was grunting as he threw shovelfuls of snow far over the parapet.

"Shovelling?" the messenger asked in a high, squeaky voice, shaking the snow off his coat.

Umrikhin did not stop working. "Come to help? Then start in right next to me. There's plenty of snow."

The messenger was hurt. "I'm from the Company Commander," he announced with boyish pride. "Where's your platoon commander? I was only told to pass on an order to clear the trenches before it gets light. I haven't any time to dig here."

"We've got heads on our shoulders too, lad," Umrikhin replied. "What do we need your order for? We know what to do without being ordered. Step aside, now, or I'll scoop you into this shovel by accident and throw you over to the Germans."

The messenger was even more hurt. "You just tell me where the platoon commander is. And don't try to scare me."

"Get going, you giant, over there." Umrikhin said.

The messenger also handed Yurgin another order: he was to send a man from the platoon to Regiment Headquarters immediately. What for the messenger did not know. Yurgin sent the resourceful Petro Semiglaz.

Petro Semiglaz returned when the platoon had finished clearing the trenches and the men, sweating from their exertions, had gone to their dug-outs. He returned with

a bulging army sack. Matvei Yurgin was absent from the dug-out, and so as he dragged in the sack Petro Semiglaz informed the entire section:

"Listen to me, chaps, I've got some news! Our Major's commended our whole platoon! That's God's truth, may my eyes fall out, if it isn't! What for? For that snow! For going out to clear it without being ordered. Understand? Initiative!"

"What did he want you for?" Oleinik asked from the stove.

"Just wait a minute, Comrade Sergeant, and I'll tell you." Semiglaz dragged the sack over to the bunks. "This is what he said, 'Convey my thanks to them, and this as well.' "

Petro Semiglaz' fair lashes fluttered against his rosy schoolgirl cheeks. Untying the sack but not opening it, he turned to the men crowding round.

"Guess what's here!"

"Perhaps it's an addition to those iron rations," Umrikhin suggested. The evening before they had been issued with two days' iron rations in case there was a long battle, but Umrikhin had managed to eat his up during the night. "If it's an addition then it'll do no harm, even a bit of good."

"No, that's out—we've got our iron rations already."

"What else could it be?"

Semiglaz raised a finger and announced in a solemn voice, "Presents! That's what!"

"More leg-pulling! What presents?"

Semiglaz opened the sack. "Here, take a look. Well, do you see? Presents, chaps, presents—from Moscow! And are they good! It's turned out a regular holiday for us! We'll celebrate the birthday of our Soviet power in fine style, we will! Just look at the attention we're getting, chaps!"

Then he started tossing the presents on a bunk. The men gathered round in a close circle. From time to time he called the attention of his friends to a particular article, turning it about in front of their eyes or waving it, like a salesman displaying his wares, and then throwing it on the bunk with a gesture at the growing pile. And there were indeed many presents: woollen sweaters, gloves, socks and scarfs, fur caps and sheepskin mittens, pouches of tobacco, cigarette cases and lighters, packages of pastry and sweets, handkerchiefs that girls had lovingly embroidered. . . .

There were exclamations from the men.

"Gosh, that's smashing, isn't it?"

"Just look at what they've sent!"

"All kinds of winter things!"

"And tobacco, too! They know what we need!"

Knowing that Petro Semiglaz was a sharp fellow and inclined to be tricky, Medvedev leaned over to Andrei from behind and whispered in his ear, "I'll bet he swiped that sack somewhere!"

Petro Semiglaz heard. He spun round.

"What did you say? Why, I'll give you one in the left ear that'll make your right ear bleed. You say I swiped it? These are presents, I tell you. People gave them out of real kindness, perhaps these were the last things they had, yet they gave them for the front, and he—get out of here!"

It was rapidly growing light. The snowstorm was abating. Matvei Yurgin, who expected the battle to start at any minute, came in. After examining the presents he distributed a third of them among the men. The rest he put back into the sack and took to the other sections.

When he left, the dug-out became noisier than ever. The grown men in greatcoats fussed over the presents like children, examining them endlessly and snatching them out of each other's hands. Sergeant Oleinik had

a hand-knitted sweater and a pair of gloves. Andrei also had a sweater, as well as a scarf, and Umrikhin a scarf and socks. Osip Chernyshov and Petro Semiglaz received warm underwear. Nurgalei had socks and gloves. . . .

Letters were enclosed with many of the presents. They were all short, but full of infinite concern and hope.

As they read the letters the men quietened down.

They exchanged brief comments:

"What's yours about?"

"Moscow."

"Mine too."

"Look—congratulations!"

"Want to read mine? Here."

Osip Chernyshov was the only one who could not calm down. Always staid and reserved, he now became lively and talkative. He went round showing everybody his letter, written on a sheet from a school note-book.

"Here, look! See who's writing? Just a kid, I'll be bound!" He sighed and shook his head. "Here, take a look. Honestly, the handwriting is just like my Semka's. See how clear it is? I don't suppose he's got a heart much bigger than a sparrow's, but he—he already feels for us, chum. Yes, must be a fine youngster!"

"What does he write?" Umrikhin asked.

"Half a minute, I haven't read it yet!"

"Well, you read it and stop bothering other people. A grown-up man with kids of your own, and you're pestering everybody like a little boy."

"So would you." Osip Chernyshov tapped his chest. "Perhaps you don't know how I feel about it."

When all the letters were read, an unusual silence fell in the dug-out. The men sat smoking with tense expressions on their faces; some were inspecting their guns once more.

* XXII *

Moscow met that holiday morning, the first morning of winter, in unusual fashion. Under a low, frowning sky the huge capital lay besmeared with motley camouflage paint and heavily coated with snow. Everywhere the wind fluttered the flags, whirling the snow on the broad squares and sweeping it down the side streets. In the deserted parks, where flocks of red-breasted bullfinches had already appeared, girls in dark-blue overalls were bustling round silver barrage balloons. Along the streets sped covered army lorries, throwing up clouds of snow in their wake. Hoarsely, as though they had caught cold, the loudspeakers on the corners announced anxious war news. On the city outskirts, shrouded in a white haze, the factory whistles called challengingly in the frosty air.

That morning nobody in Moscow thought about a celebration of the kind the capital had been famous for before the war. Each marked the great holiday in his own heart. Everybody set to work with special zeal, aware that in their labour to strengthen the capital lay its salvation and its future. Moscow began that morning with grim but inspired labour.

Long before, all the German newspapers had announced that on November 7th, the birthday of Soviet power in Russia, the German army would hold a parade in the vanquished capital, Moscow.

But life has its own laws.

On the morning of November 7th, Moscow witnessed the traditional parade of Red Army units on Red Square.

. . . Early in the morning a van from Army Headquarters drove up to the advance positions held by Ozerov's regiment. The van was parked in a safe place—a gully in the forest about three hundred yards behind the line. Then a wire was led from it to the edge of the wood

and a loudspeaker which looked like a huge blossoming bluebell was fastened to a fir sapling. And when the parade opened in Moscow, over the labyrinth of trenches with its numerous secret underground dwellings, over the snowy wind-swept fields for several miles around, drowning all other sounds, rang out the calm, forceful words of Stalin:

"The enemy calculated that after the very first blow our Army would be dispersed, and our country would be forced to her knees. But the enemy sadly miscalculated. . . ."

Attentive faces peered out of every shelter, dug-out, and blockhouse. Helmets showed up all along the trenches. As they listened intently to catch their leader's words, the men felt as though they were laying in a stock of bullets and grenades before a battle.

"The enemy is not so strong," rang out over the defences, "as some frightened little intellectuals imagine. The devil is not so terrible as he is painted. . . ."

The men in Oleinik's dug-out listened to their leader in silence with the exception of Umrikhin, who to everybody's disgust insisted on talking. In the brief pauses between sentences he never failed to grab somebody by the sleeve, wink enthusiastically and offer a comment or simply say, "Hear that, chum? That's something!"

Andrei finally lost his temper. "Shut your trap, you!" he said, grasping him by the shoulder.

In the back of the dug-out Umrikhin could not hear so well. "Sounds a bit hoarse now, doesn't it?" he remarked to Osip Chernyshov.

"It's coming out of a loudspeaker! What do you expect?" Chernyshov snapped irritably. He moved away from Umrikhin. "And stop bothering me."

"What if he catches cold! It's a raw day, and he's getting on in years—"

"Damn you for saying a thing like that! Shut up!"

"I didn't mean anything," Umrikhin said, backing into a corner of the dug-out. "Damn you too—for blowing off steam like the regiment kitchen!"

The leader's words thundered out over the field....

Major Ozerov stood listening in the little trench near the entrance to his dug-out at the observation post. Knowing that the Germans would attack that day, he had moved to the post while it was still dark. The men and officers attached to the regiment staff were clustered in the trenches that ran to the neighbouring dug-outs. The only one who was not gazing towards the rear, from where the words of the leader were coming, was an observer perched on the lower branches of a shaggy fir near by. He looked steadily into the west, and the west only.

"Listen to that!" he called down in boyish glee, bending over. "I bet even the Germans can hear!"

The next instant he huddled up against the trunk of the fir. German batteries had opened fire from beyond the dark band of forest in the west.

Ozerov gave a start. "Into the slits!" he ordered.

The men scattered.

A moment later a gigantic moan filled the air and a whistling and whining sounded over the defences; hundreds of points of flame shot up, as though the earth had crashed into something at full speed; branches and needles showered down from the trees; a pall of snow and smoke rose over the entire line held by the regiment, and thunderous crashes sounded on all sides.

The Germans had begun their artillery preparation.

The observer tumbled down from the fir. He rolled over once in the snow, crawled to the trench on all fours, and jumped into the Regiment Commander's dug-out. Without stopping to shake the snow off himself he huddled into a corner and began to hiccup loudly, claw-

ing at his chest and looking round wildly at the men in the dug-out.

"It'll pass," Ozerov said reassuringly.

The artillery preparation was extremely heavy and covered the entire sector held by the regiment. Only rarely could single explosions be distinguished—all over the positions there was a solid, deafening crash and thunder and grinding. The earth shuddered violently. The air became heavy with the smells of gunpowder smoke and charred iron. All over the defences flames licked the air and thick, choking banks of smoke rose, as from a huge forest fire. The sky darkened. An awe-inspiring gloom descended, as during an eclipse of the sun.

But at the edge of the wood the loudspeaker was still thundering, and occasionally the leader's words, transmitted from Moscow, broke through and carried out over the area:

"May you be inspired ... the banner of the great Lenin!"

"Death to the German invaders!"

The air in Ozerov's dug-out was filled with dust. It felt as though a giant had picked up the dug-out and was shaking it this way and that. Earth sifted down from between the logs of the ceiling, and big clods fell from the walls. Petya Uralets removed his hand from the smoky little lamp, and it was immediately swept off the table. The observer found the lamp in the dark and relit it.

"Hold on to it!" Ozerov shouted to him.

... Ozerov had awaited this battle in tense anticipation. He realized that it would be a severe and important test of the regiment's staunchness, of the inner reserves on which it was living during these days of the great battle near Moscow. He realized that the honour and glory of his regiment depended upon the outcome

of the battle. Accordingly, every minute of the last few days his mind had been occupied with one thought—how best to prepare the regiment. In a short time he had accomplished many jobs, big and small, to strengthen the defences; in their entirety they were to be the cornerstone of the regiment's victory. While carrying out this preparatory work, by his appearance and his bearing and everything he did he filled his men with a conviction that was as firm in him as, say, his belief that winter would soon come; this he did almost without being aware of it himself, and without making other people aware of it either. He provided his dug-out at the command post with every comfort possible at the forward lines. He even took in a cat which he had picked up in an abandoned village near by. After that the whole regiment began to talk.

"Heard how our major's settled down? Well, chum, it looks as though it'll be a long do. He's even got a cat. We're going to make a firm stand here, if you ask me."

Major Ozerov had implicit faith in the ability of his regiment to withstand any enemy attack. And the faith of a commanding officer is passed on to his men along invisible threads; it is like an electric current, and, like an electric bulb, the men's spirit glows with greater or lesser intensity depending upon its force—dimly, if their commander's faith is weak, and with a cheerful, dazzling light, if it is strong.

And now the battle had begun.

Notwithstanding his firm belief that his regiment would win, a stab shot through Major Ozerov's heart when the Germans opened fire. Once again (for the nth time) he became alive to the responsibility that rested upon him for the outcome of the battle and for the lives of the hundreds of men under his command. The whole morning he had been mentally checking up on how he

had prepared the regiment for battle, examining everything with the eye of a sceptical outsider. The conclusion he had reached was that everything necessary had been done, and done well, despite the hurry. But now when he returned to these thoughts, for some reason he suddenly began to discover various shortcomings: he recalled that a gun had not been set up in ambush in the centre of the defences as he had wished; that reserve cables had not been laid to the battalions; that the regiment's ammunition supply depot had not been moved up closer to the forward positions.... At that moment Ozerov noticed that he was unconsciously making all sorts of unnecessary movements—now flicking dust from the map, now looking into his dispatch case for no particular reason, now rubbing his eyes with his handkerchief. "I've got to stop this!" he told himself firmly. "What's come over me?" The thought flashed through his mind that Stalin was probably still standing on the mausoleum and that his calm, even voice was ringing out over the land. Instantly his worries fled, like dead leaves carried away before the wind. All the shortcomings taken together did not, of course, constitute a flaw that might weaken the regiment. "Never mind!" he said to himself, setting his jaw. "We'll hold out!" And knowing how a commander's mood always infects those around him, he shot an anxious glance at the men in his dug-out.

There were two officers from headquarters, the commander of the signal platoon, observers, messengers and telephone operators. All were hugging the walls, crowding back as far as they could from the door. They held their fingers in their ears, and every time the dug-out shook heavily and lumps of earth fell off the walls they milled about in confusion. The lamp the observer was holding flickered feebly. The only calm person was Petya Uralets. Sitting on a bunk, he stared stubbornly

in front of him, hugging the cat. The cat was trying to break away; its whiskers twitched and its eyes glittered like the sparks from green rockets in a night sky.

"What's the matter, puss, scared?" Ozerov shouted for everybody in the dug-out to hear. "Bad cat! Tsk, tsk!"

Ozerov sat down on a bunk, took the cat from his orderly, held her up in front of him and shouted still louder, "Don't be scared, puss! The devil's not so terrible as he's painted. Hear that? Hey, where are you off to? Silly old thing, just look at the men; nobody's afraid. That's all right, they'll make some noise and then they'll stop. But you just wait and see how we'll give it to them, puss! You just wait!"

Many of the men moved away from the walls to hear what he was shouting to the cat. The observer crawled out of his corner, winked at the cat and began to adjust the wick of the little lamp.

"It'll pass!" he called out, reassured.

Ozerov's blue eyes crinkled with laughter. He bent over to Petya Uralets and, waving his left arm, shouted into his orderly's ear, "Play!"

The day before, the travelling club of the division had sent the regiment an accordion. Major Ozerov had turned it over to Petya Uralets, who had the reputation of being a good accordion player, and had told him to keep it handy. The Major had developed a fondness for the accordion during his youth, spent in a Siberian village.

"Play what?" Petya asked as he reached for the accordion in the corner.

"The one about Moscow. You know it?"

Petya Uralets settled the accordion in his lap.

The crash and roar at the forward line did not abate. The dug-out was getting such a shaking that they all felt as if they were hurtling over a bumpy, rutted track on a dark night in a carriage drawn by a team of runaway

horses, and at any moment the carriage might receive the final jolt that would smash it to pieces. . . . But Major Ozerov sat on the earth-strewn bunk hugging the cat, and, swaying in time to the music, sang the song about Moscow to the accompaniment of the accordion:

Unbreakable,
Unshakable,
A city strong and wondrous fair!
Oh country mine,
Oh Moscow mine,
The capital beyond compare!

He was not sure of the words with the exception of the chorus, which he repeated several times. When he paused to glance at his watch he noted with surprise that all the men in the dug-out had joined in.

Oh country mine,
Oh Moscow mine,
The capital beyond compare!

* XXIII *

A white hare bounded insanely across the smoky field, all over which shells were bursting with splashes of flame. At one point it was about to take cover under a bush of sweet-briar, but there was a blinding flash and it was thrown up into the air. It freed itself from the soft snow, which smelled of gunpowder smoke, leaped to the side—and landed in a trench. For a few seconds it twisted and hopped about frantically, scratching at the steep clay walls. Then, looking round, it dashed madly down the empty trench littered with clods of charred earth and full of acrid smoke. Again it was blinded and tossed up. It came to a sharp bend in the

trench and there, exhausted, deaf to the noises around, it huddled up in a ball and froze in terror.

When the artillery preparation started, Sergeant Oleinik, who had been complaining of a stomach-ache since early morning, suddenly had a vomiting fit. He fell down by the fire in the dug-out, moaning and retching with an effort that racked his whole body; he clutched at his chest, shook his head and, closing his eyes weakly, wiped his wet lips with his palm.

Matvei Yurgin leaned over in the semi-darkness and prodded him. "What have you eaten, you son-of-a-bitch?" he shouted angrily above the thunder of the gun-fire.

"Oh, leave me alone!" Oleinik moaned. "What's the matter with me?... Could it be from that tinned meat I ate?"

"When it quietens down you go to the first-aid station, hear?"

"I'll lie here. It may go off soon."

"What's the sense of that? You know what's going to happen here?"

"I'll do some fighting yet."

"A hell of a fighter you are!"

Matvei Yurgin saw that Oleinik would not be fit for action for some time. He crawled over to the corner near the entrance to the dug-out where the guns were stacked. Here Andrei, in a greatcoat and helmet, sat with his shoulder pressed against the wall. Yurgin poked his friend and shouted, "You take over! Understand?"

Andrei's white teeth flashed in the gloom.

"Yes!"

"Don't be hot-headed!" Yurgin cautioned. "Understand? Keep cool and use your head. Hear?"

The thunder over the line continued unabated. All of a sudden the dug-out was shaken so violently that everybody froze in their places. There was a deafening

crash of iron and wood, lumps of earth showered down, mess-tins jangled.... A shell had torn into a corner of the dug-out, loosening the top layer of roof logs and pushing one log from the bottom layer almost on to the bunks; from the corner, where a patch of grey sky showed, came a draught of cold air mingled with acrid smoke. Until then many of the men had been holding back their fear by exerting all their will-power. But now they all huddled in the dark corners of the dug-out and under the bunks, not even aware of the feverish trembling that shook their bodies.

Andrei, like many others in the regiment, was experiencing the horrors of a furious artillery preparation for the first time. Every moment, as he sat there hunched over, he expected another shell to hit the dug-out—and then.... But he did not want to think about what would happen then. He had already trained himself not to think about death. The minutes sped by, and his entire being grew tense in anticipation of an explosion overhead. "If only it doesn't come!" he exclaimed to himself every now and again. But although his being was frozen in anticipation, deep in his heart there glimmered a hope that it would all end favourably—and then.... And about what would happen then, when it had all ended favourably, he thought eagerly during the few seconds when he was capable of thinking.

Before, Andrei had regarded his participation in battle as a stern necessity. But on the way back from the medical battalion, when he saw how much labour the people at large had put into the defence of Moscow, he had experienced for the first time a great longing to come to grips with the enemy as soon as possible. The events of the past few days in the regiment had made this desire even keener.

Though they were all waiting for that moment, not one of the men heard the gun-fire cease abruptly. The

only one who did was Matvei Yurgin. He snatched up a pair of grenades and shouted into the interior of the dug-out, "Follow me! Into the trench!"

Many were surprised to hear his voice, but nobody understood what he was shouting and nobody budged. Yurgin began to pull at the men in the semi-darkness. "Into the trench! Action stations!"

The men finally realized that the earth was no longer trembling and that the crash of bursting shells over their dug-out had stopped. They came to themselves and picked up their guns.

Dashing out of the dug-out, Yurgin saw the quivering white bundle in the corner of the trench. "A hare!" He knelt and cautiously stretched out his hands. He expected the hare to leap away in fright, but it only trembled and shrank back. Yurgin caught it. Then he turned to the men, who were already running past him in the trench. "Hurry up!" he shouted.

The men, armed with rifles and grenades, scrambled past Yurgin one after the other without noticing the hare in his arms. Bumping into the walls of the trench in their haste, they scattered in both directions. Only Umrikhin, who was the last to run out, paused beside Yurgin. "A hare?" he gasped. "How'd it get here?"

Smoke was still rising from the field and snow-flakes were whirling in the air. Lone shells whined by high overhead and crashed beyond the wood: the Germans were shifting their fire deeper into the defences. In the west there was a muffled drone of engines, and rockets showered sparks in the frowning sky.

"For the pot, eh?" Umrikhin said with a nod at the hare.

"Get to your place! Hear me?" Yurgin advanced on him, his narrowed brown eyes glittering. "I'll show you the pot!" He shook his fist at Umrikhin, who ran over to his place, crouching.

Yurgin saw that his other sections had also come out; helmeted figures were moving all along the trench. He raised the hare high over his head, as though showing it the nearby wood to the east, then set it down quickly. "Home you go! At the double!"

The smoke cleared completely, and the entire field up to the band of forest, from which the rockets were soaring, came into view. German tanks appeared at the far end of the field. They rumbled towards the defences, whirling up the snow. Behind them the tiny figures of German soldiers could be seen. Shouts and the clang of weapons rose over the defences.

Yurgin ran down the trench, crying at the top of his voice, "Get your grenades ready! Fire bottles! Don't waver!"

Andrei set up his machine-gun on the platform. Next to it the short Nurgalei, who did not have to crouch over in the trench, began to lay out magazine drums, grenades, and fi e bottles, casting quick glances at Andrei. Umrikhin took up his stand a bit to the left. The other men also took their places. From the way they laid their rifles on the parapet and from their talk Andrei realized that the harrowing fear they had experienced in the dim dug-out had given way to a new feeling; now they were eager to live and to act as the battle demanded. Andrei no longer felt the least afraid. He was only tired after the long waiting for another explosion in the dug-out, and his helmet seemed so heavy and tight that his ears rang. But in the fresh air his breathing came easier with each second; and with each second he sensed more and more of the elation he would experience in battle.

The leading tanks were now approaching the rise topped by the glistening white birch. Their infantry followed close behind. Machine-guns in some of the emplacements opened up at them. Then crisp rifle reports

rang out. A few of the tanks promptly answered: with shell fire at the emplacements they had spotted, and machine-gun fire at the trench.

"Go on, chaps!" Andrei shouted, glancing round. "At the infantry! Make the bastards spit blood!"

Andrei fired off a whole drum at the advancing infantry, then glanced at Nurgalei. His black eyes flashing and his face beaded with sweat, Nurgalei shouted, "German finished! He lay down and die!"

Andrei did not hear our anti-tank guns concealed at the forward edge open rapid direct fire at the tanks. Two of the tanks stopped near the rise where the birch-tree stood, throwing up thick clouds of smoke; then pointed leaves of flame burst out of their steel bellies. The other tanks increased their speed and came on faster, their guns pounding. At that moment our heavy batteries in concealed positions came to the assistance of the light anti-tank guns. A piercing whine filled the air, and the section of the field across which the tanks were moving shuddered with the crash and the rumble.

"Our guns, eh?" Umrikhin shouted.

"Ours!" Andrei replied. "Can't you see?"

"O-o-o!" Umrikhin gasped. Thinking that Andrei would be able to hear him, he waved his arm and cried, "That's giving it to them! Not like near that river! Remember? Oh boy! Oh mother of mine! Andrei! Andrei!" He pressed up against the wall of the trench. "No-o-o, now they won't get us! Andrei, everything's all right! Now they won't get us!"

Our batteries kept up a steady fire. A blanket of smoke spread over the field in front of the regiment's positions. Many of the tanks disappeared from sight. Some were tearing about madly, belching flames. But two broke through the zone of fire and advanced to the trench held by Matvei Yurgin's platoon. Without in-

fantry support there was now no purpose in their charging the trench, but the tankmen were infuriated by their set-back.

The gun on the platoon's sector managed to pump several shells into the leading tank. The tank turned and, treads grinding, zigzagged back, showing a peacock's tail of flame and smoke. But the second tank spotted the gun and put it out of action with one accurate shot. Now that it had cleared its path to the trench it came on, still slowly, evidently wary of mines, heading straight for Andrei and his comrades.

All that followed probably took no more than three minutes. But Andrei was unaware of the speed with which he thought and acted, and so it seemed to him that the battle with the tank lasted quite a long time.

This was his second encounter with a tank. And although the first, back on the other side of the Vazuza, had ended unsuccessfully, it had taught him something. Besides, his countless talks with men who had fought back tank attacks had furnished him with a store of varied and useful information. That was sufficient for him now to accept battle with the armoured hulk courageously. And so when he saw that the artillery would not be able to check the tank for fear of hitting our own men and that he would have to fight it with manual weapons, he felt no fear. He was gripped by a single desire—the desire that in the last few days had not ceased to call him to battle.

He swept the machine-gun and the drums from the platform, primed an anti-tank grenade, shouted to Umrikhin and Nurgalei to prepare as well, straightened his helmet, squatted in the trench to rehearse the throw, and then froze in tense expectation. The enemy tank advanced, from time to time trying to rake the trench with machine-gun fire. Some of the bullets bit into the earth in front of the parapet while others stitched the snow

on top. Andrei could not raise his head over the trench to see how close the tank was. He had to strain all his senses to catch the moment when the unseen tank would be so close that it would not be able to machine-gun the trench. Missing that moment meant being too late to throw his grenade—the tank would rumble over the trench. Of the few remaining seconds before the tank hit him, it was that second he had to catch.

The thunder of battle made it difficult for Andrei to gauge the precise moment for the throw. When he could not hear bullets overhead, some sixth sense told him that the tank was still far away. The strain of waiting threw him into a heavy sweat. He was so tense and keyed-up that it was hard to stand still. The thought flashed through his mind that the tank might suddenly swerve, and he grew frightened; he knew that with the exception of Umrikhin none of the men in his section had ever met tanks, and that in this first encounter they might lose their heads and let the tank pass over the trench. "If only it doesn't turn!" Andrei wished fervently. "If only it comes at me!"

A bullet whistled by overhead. Andrei felt a great heat inside him: this was the moment. With a sense of vast relief that set his spirits soaring, Andrei quickly straightened up behind the parapet. The tank was just crossing the line at which he had hoped to catch it. He hurled his grenade under the tank's right tread with furious and triumphant force.

It exploded with a crash.

Lumps of earth flew into the trench, a gust of snow swept over and smoke rose in whirls. Andrei was just about to peep out of the trench when a second explosion rang out, then a third and a fourth. . . . Umrikhin, Petro Semiglaz, and Osip Chernyshov, who had run up to assist Andrei, had thrown their grenades at the tank. Immediately after the grenade-bursts the hot-headed

Nurgalei, as agile as a squirrel, leaped out of the trench with two fire bottles. Though the tank was badly damaged it still had venomous, fire-breathing life. It turned about to retreat. Heedless of the danger, Nurgalei dashed up to it and smashed both bottles against its armour one after another. Streams of fire rolled down the sides of the tank; it began to emit a thick, foul smoke that smelled of rotten eggs.

Andrei saw none of this: dirt had blown into his eyes. But soon he heard the men at the sides rejoicing, and then, quite near, Yurgin's voice, "Fine work, boys! That's the way!"

"Give it to 'em! Give it to 'em!" Umrikhin roared, evidently in reply. "They'll remember it all their lives! That's the way to greet them!"

From behind the wood in the rear there arose a roar and a whistle as though a powerful geyser had burst through the earth's crust and uprooted scores of trees.

R-r-ry-yk! Ry-y-yk!

A few seconds later curly waves of fire sprang up all over the far edge of the field, towards which the few undamaged German tanks and scattered infantry were retreating. Banks of smoke shut out the west.

"That's the 'Katyusha'!" Yurgin explained at the top of his voice.

Andrei longed to look out at the battlefield at that moment, but he could not rub the dirt out of his eyes....

* XXIV *

Soon after, the Germans threw tanks against the other sectors of the regiment's defences. Meanwhile, as if in revenge for the defeat, several German batteries launched a hurricane of fire at the sector held by Sharakshaneh.

A few minutes before the shelling began, Sergeant Oleinik was sent to the medical unit; his poisoning was

so severe and the vomiting had so weakened him that it would be some time before he could return to action. In the first few minutes of the artillery attack Andrei was scratched on the neck by a shell splinter. A medical orderly dressed his wound in the dug-out. When the roar of the explosions subsided the medical orderly advised him to go back to the rear also, but Andrei refused.

"It'll heal!" he shouted, slipping out of the dug-out.

From the commands and shouts he heard in the trench he realized at once that the German infantry was attacking. Glancing over the parapet he saw them: a huge grey crowd moving across the snowy, shell-pitted field. They were already nearing the rise on which the birch-tree stood surrounded by smashed and burnt-out German tanks. The Germans must have come out of the forest and covered part of the way while their artillery fire was raging over the defences.

"Drums!" Andrei shouted.

Nurgalei thrust a drum into his hands.

As he loaded the gun, Andrei heard Yurgin call out, "Let them come closer! Fire point-blank!"

"They need a spraying with that 'Katyusha'!" Umrikhin exclaimed.

As they reloaded their rifles, all the men waited for the awe-inspiring "Katyusha," which they had never yet seen, to roar out from behind the wood and engulf that whole mass of men in curly waves of fire. But meanwhile, at the Regiment Commander's observation post, the following scene was taking place.

The observer put down his field glasses and reported to the Regiment Commander, "Comrade Major, those are our men!"

"What do you mean ours?"

"Honest to goodness, they're ours! They're wearing Russian greatcoats! And they're unarmed!"

Major Ozerov raised his glasses to his eyes.

The figures moving across the snowy field were not the usual German skirmish line but a huge crowd of unarmed, floundering and falling men in tattered grey Russian greatcoats. He could see their faces clearly. They were Russians beyond any doubt. In a flash Ozerov realized that the Germans were using Russian prisoners to screen their advance; they often did that.

"What about behind?" Ozerov called out, lifting his eyes to the fir. "Anybody there?"

"I think there are.... Yes, Germans, Comrade Major!"

"Rockets!" Ozerov yelled into the dug-out.

A white rocket soared upward with a hiss.

Yurgin froze. "What's that? Hold fire?" He caught Andrei by the shoulder; Andrei had not noticed the rocket and was taking aim to open fire from his machine-gun. "Wait!"

Commands flew along the trench:

"As you were!"

"Wait! Hold your fire!"

Helmets popped up all along the line.

The grey avalanche of men, spread out about two hundred yards in width, advanced steadily toward the defences. Examining it intently, Matvei Yurgin also realized with sudden horror what the Germans were doing, and he began to tremble so violently that he placed the grenades he had been holding since the beginning of the battle on the ledge of the trench in case he dropped them. He wanted to do something, to shout something to the men of his platoon, but he had neither the strength nor the voice. He did not lose his head—that he never did—but what the Germans were doing was so staggering, so criminal and inhuman, that for a few seconds he lost heart completely.

But by the time the others in the trench were just beginning to grasp the situation, Matvei Yurgin had

taken himself in hand and was thinking clearly and quickly. He saw that the German plan was simple: the Russians would not, of course, fire upon their own men, and this would enable the Germans to come up to the trench hidden behind the crowd. When the crowd poured into the trench and mixed with the soldiers, they would shower both the one and the other with grenades and then break through in depth. Yurgin understood that if the crowd of prisoners poured into the trench such confusion would arise that his men would not be able to meet the enemy properly. But what was he to do? Precious seconds were passing. Several times he looked round. None of the senior officers had issued any new commands. Meanwhile the column of prisoners was coming nearer and nearer. He had to make an independent decision. And he decided that if a hand-to-hand engagement was inevitable, then it should be not in the crowded trench but a few dozen yards in front of it, and that it should take the enemy by surprise.

Yurgin snatched up his grenades and gave the order to prepare to charge. The order passed from man to man up and down the trench.

Andrei ran up to Yurgin. "Comrade Lieutenant! Those are Russians!"

"I know! But behind them there are Germans!"

Yurgin began to shout again, explaining to his men that they had to pass through the crowd of prisoners and then go for the Germans with their bayonets. After he had heard his order repeated all through the platoon, he climbed out of the trench, stood on the parapet and looked to left and right.

"Follow me-e-e!" he cried out.

All along the line the men went over the top.

As he hurried them on, Yurgin heard a roar of engines on the flanks. At Ozerov's orders T-34 medium tanks, hidden until now in the woods, had charged the

field. Raising clouds of snow, they sped far out into the open terrain and when almost on a level with the crowd opened machine-gun fire from both sides. Shrieks rose from the crowd; the prisoners wavered in confusion and started back, but then rushed forward again towards the trench, knocking some of their number off their feet. The tanks continued to fire from both sides and to close in on the crowd. Yurgin finally grasped their purpose: they were firing at the Germans to cut them off from the prisoners and allow the latter to move ahead.

Matvei Yurgin rejoiced that his decision, his first independent combat decision, and such an important one, had been correct. The Russian tank attack had made it easier to carry out. He jumped down from the parapet and ran towards the crowd.

His men dashed after him.

"This way!" he shouted frenziedly, waving a grenade. "Double!"

As the crowd of prisoners neared the trench, it thinned out noticeably: those who were strong broke forward, realizing that salvation had come; the weak and wounded came on behind, panting and falling, the skirts of their ragged greatcoats dragging in the snow. Matvei Yurgin's platoon ran into the straggling crowd.

The platoon was ready to push through the crowd of prisoners as quickly as possible and attack the Germans in the wake of the tanks, which were already roaring up in front. But the prisoners rushed up to the soldiers with happy cries and tears of joy. The emaciated, bearded men, bare-headed and half-naked or in tattered clothes and filthy bandages, panting from weakness, and sobbing, began to throw themselves upon the soldiers and embrace them with incoherent cries of gratitude. Their hearts were so overflowing with the happiness that had suddenly come to them on the battlefield that they were in no

condition to understand anything and nothing could stop their shouts and their tears.

"Let us pass, let us pass!" the soldiers shouted on all sides as they pushed through the crowd. "Later, later!"

"Goodness!" Umrikhin exclaimed time and again. He was the tallest and most conspicuous, and the prisoners were holding him up more than the others. "Gone crazy? Let me pass, lads! Don't hold me back!"

It was with great difficulty that the men broke through the crowd. Their eyes gleaming fiercely, they burst forward after the tanks, and the Russian battle-cry resounded over the field, "Hur-rah!

The rest of the company streamed out of the trenches to support Matvei Yurgin. Our counter-attack began.

Then our batteries spoke again. In a solid whining stream the shells flew high over the sector where the Russian infantry were wiping out the enemy in hand-to-hand fighting. A huge crested wave of fire reared up over the German positions. Nocturnal darkness shrouded the west.

* XXV *

The Germans launched several furious attacks at Ozerov's regiment during the day, but they did not succeed in moving a single step closer to Moscow. In front of the regiment's positions dozens of German tanks were smashed or set on fire and hundreds of Germans killed.

Towards evening the roar of battle subsided.

The forward trenches grew empty. Men and officers crowded into the cold and damp dug-outs smelling of decaying straw and fir branches. Only the sentries remained at their posts. Silence, the strange tense silence of the front line, deepened quickly all over the forward area. It was broken only occasionally by the voices of the men in the burial parties, who were going through the trenches looking for the dead and collecting their

weapons. Here and there wisps of smoke curled up from the earth as the chilled defenders kindled fires in their underground dwellings.

Andrei did not rest after the battle; he gulped down a chunk of bread and was the first in his section to take up sentry duty in the trench. After the long hours of intense fighting it was hard to recognize him. This was no longer the quiet, handsome, thoughtful young fellow the people of Olkhovka had known, but a man with a stern, harsh expression and a dark, wary look in his eyes—the look of a man who has seen death and learned that it is not always all-powerful.

Andrei had difficulty in keeping on his feet; he could feel all his joints aching. But the pain and his extreme weariness were alleviated by a feeling of unequalled happiness. He could not understand when and why this feeling had come to him, but he felt sure that he was experiencing it for the first time in his life.

Loading his rifle and straightening his helmet, he drew himself up to his full height in the trench and looked out over the battlefield. Above the distant black band of forest a pale sunset was fading. The haze of twilight was creeping up everywhere, but a keen eye could see far. The entire field had been ploughed up by shells and mines. In some places the first snow had been swept away completely, as though by some iron broom; in others there was a charred mixture of earth and snow. All over the field stood black heaps of metal that only recently had been alive and powerful; from some, yellowish wisps of smoke were still curling. All the remaining patches of snow were dotted with dead bodies.... And just as in the morning, on the naked little rise in the midst of that shambles where fire and steel had raged throughout the day and where death had trampled everything, stood the lone white birch, glowing softly in the twilight.

"Still there?" Andrei whispered in amazement.

And Andrei felt that there was something very significant and portentous in the fact that like some sacred thing this birch—the beautiful tree of song—had survived such a furious battle in that unsheltered place. Nature herself had set it there to adorn the drab field, and hence nature herself had endowed it with immortality. And Andrei felt that new sensation well up even stronger within him. But now he knew what it was—it was the joy of victory. He was happy that he had become a real soldier, that in the evening he was standing in the same place where he had begun the battle in the morning. He kept his rapturous gaze on the birch for a few seconds, and then, placing his hand on the ledge of the trench, said with great solemnity and rejoicing in his heart, as though making a vow to the earth itself, "And it will always be there!"

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